

Handful of Pesetas

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation with distinction in English in
the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

By

Philip Cogley

The Ohio State University
November 2006

Project Advisor: Professor Lee K. Abbott, Department of English

“No, this is not Carlos Estemadera,” said Carlos Estemadera into the phone. He rolled over on his back and scratched between his legs. From the smell of things, he feared he had pissed the bed.

“Of course it is, Carlos!” The voice on the other end sounded like it had woken up much too early and had drunk far too many cups of coffee. “Great to hear your voice. This is—”

“Nope, not Carlos. Sorry.” He tossed the phone onto the cradle as the tinny voice kept talking. He looked around for his briefs. *Nada*.

“Did I really piss the bed?” he said to his bedroom. The smell of vinegar burned his nostrils.

The phone rang again. He sat up, blinked against his stinging eyes and stuck his nose in the air. He licked his lips. Vinegar again. *Coño*, could he have peed in his own mouth? He rubbed the sheets around his rear, but they were dry. Could he have peed in the closet? *Dios*, he should know better than to drink whiskey.

His eyes took their time pulling the room into focus. At least his bedroom appeared to be in order: framed posters from his old films lining the canary walls, empty liquor bottles and used underwear scattered about, wrinkled T-shirts spilling out of the walk-in wardrobe.

The phone was still ringing, and he wondered what time it could be. Judging by the thickness of the air, he imagined it must have been close to noon, meaning *siesta* time in just a couple of hours. Carlos swelled with Spanish pride—he would go down to El Zozo, his favorite café, gorge himself on their scandalous brunch and then pass right back out again. His stomach burbled. Maybe he would even have a drink while he was there. A little *cabello del perro*, he thought.

He squinted into the full-length mirror resting against the wall across from his bed. His head started pounding, probably because the Goddamned phone was still ringing. Was that a cardboard box at the foot of the bed? He leaned forward and looked into it.

Ah, *claro*. At the bottom he saw a few chicken bones, soggy french fries and a pool of vinegar. So, he hadn't pissed the bed after all. He'd just been a little hungry the night before. *Lógico*. He decided it would be okay to answer the phone.

“¿Bueno?”

“Carlos! I'm so glad to finally get a hold of you.”

Carlos' aching head continued to berate him. *I'm on the phone*, he said to it. “Who—?”

“Well, I know it's early in the day for surprises, but this is Irg Oterb.”

“¿Quién?” Carlos severely doubted he was in the mood to talk to someone with a name that ridiculous.

“Irg Oterb. The producer.”

“Producer?”

The voice let out a strange, irritated sigh. “I guess I was vain enough to believe you'd know some of my production credits.” Then, a dismissive laugh. “Oh well. I'll have my assistant fax you my resume.”

Carlos frowned. *This was a dirty trick, phone*, he thought above the clattering of his thumping head. “Eh...” he said. “I don't have a fax—”

“Listen, Carlos. We're making the Great American Bullfighting Film, and we need you as the leading man.”

Bullfighting? he thought. What did he know about bullfighting? As a child, he had been to a number of bullfights, like any good Spaniard, and most were relatively uneventful: the men

came out in their fancy suits, rode around the bull poking it with spears and stabbing it in the neck with those fancy little knives, and then the noble matador did his little dance before threading a sword through the bull's neck into its heart. The bull fell, the people cheered, the bull got one or both ears chopped off, and then the children streamed out of the seats to dance around the hulking mass of bleeding muscle before it was dragged out of the ring and hacked to pieces to be sold as meat. They wanted to make a movie out of that?

"Before you say anything, let me tell you about the project. The location is incredible. You've been to Florida?"

"I—"

"We're talking on-location shooting in San Rebat. In the panhandle, right there off the Gulf of Mexico. Beautiful colonial town, nice and warm. Notice it even has a Spanish name!"

"I—"

"And our creative team is just stellar. I'm sure you're familiar with the exciting things Yawg Nimeh's been doing in the director's chair."

"I—"

"How does a \$250,000 pay day sound to you, Carlos?"

Carlos looked around at his destitute living quarters. He stared at his blackened eyes and distended stomach in the mirror. *I haven't done a film in over ten years*, he wanted to say. His stomach gurgled.

"I'm going to throw up," he said, and did, heaving a purplish, vinegar-scented sauce down the front of his naked torso.

"I'm just as excited as you are," said Irg Oterb.



And so this is how Carlos Estemadera, after receiving what Irg Oterb described as a “tentative script” for a film called *Handful of Pesetas* and scanning it for anything that ought to dissuade him from making \$250,000 in exchange for a couple months’ work, calling his agent to cancel his scheduled shoots for Lavanda soap, and notifying his mother (“*¡Pero qué emoción, hijo! Qué emoción!*”), came to board United Airlines flight 1964 bound for New York City. There, he would meet Irg Oterb and Yawg Nimeh, and then the three of them would catch a flight to San Rebat together. Or at least that’s what Carlos could recall from his one-sided conversations with Oterb. Irg Oterb. *Qué nombre más raro.*

Carlos settled into his first-class window seat and looked out at the tarmac. It was odd, the way things had worked out. One day you’re an out-of-work has-been scraping by on ads for soap during the afternoon *telenovelas*, the next you’re pulling in a quarter million making The Great American Bullfighting Film. *Así es la vida.* True, the money only worked out to about 195,000 Euros, but that was still more than enough to pay off his rather sizable credit card debt and double his income for the year.

“*Algo para tomar, señor?*” The stewardess was young and thin, with that beautiful dark complexion only certain Spanish women had. Carlos imagined her sprouting from the rich Andalusian soil like an olive tree.

“*Whiskey. J&B.*”

“*¿Con hielo?*”

“*Sí.*” Carlos watched her exquisite *culo* walk away from him towards the front of the cabin. The only thing better than a whiskey over ice, he thought, would be for that little *señorita*

to serve it to him sitting in his lap. He smiled and looked back out the window, enjoying the heat from the midday sun.

The girl came back and held out the glass, damp with condensation, and a small beverage napkin. "*Aquí tiene.*"

He let his thumb graze her fingers as he took the glass, then set the napkin on his knee. He smiled broadly, then took a drink. "*Delicioso,*" he said, and winked at her.

He was about to ask her name, but the plane's engines had started, and she quickly moved to the front of the cabin to demonstrate proper usage of the plane's oxygen masks in the event of something terrible.

The plane taxied around a few curves, and Carlos watched the black asphalt move beneath the wheels like a slowly circulating treadmill. After a moment, the engines grew louder, and Carlos could see the plane had reached the runway. He glanced to the front of the cabin. *Qué lastima.* The beautiful stewardess had disappeared.

He took another drink and let his body sink deep into the seat. He felt warm and relaxed. The plane lifted off the ground, and Carlos watched the city of Málaga shrink beneath him. He felt a kind of pity as he contemplated the puny citizens below, driving their puny cars and continuing on with their boring, puny lives. *Gracias a Dios,* he thought, enjoying the give of the cool leather beneath him. Thank God his fortunes were finally turning around.



Mercifully, Carlos was able to sleep through the majority of the eight-hour flight, though he was less than thrilled when he was awakened with drool all over his shoulder by the attractive

stewardess. He promptly lost all memory of her, however, as he moved first through U.S. Immigration, where he labored to persuade the woman behind the counter that he was neither a terrorist nor an undocumented worker, and then U.S. Customs, where he took great pains to exonerate himself from suspicion of drug trafficking.

Exhausted and ill-tempered, Carlos made his way through the gate marked “arrivals.” The first thing he saw was a large group of very serious-faced women holding a sign that read, “Welcome Home Far Hills Community Church Congregation Dayton Ohio.” Around their legs milled a number of very serious-faced children, many of the boys wearing miniature suits.

Wait. Wasn’t he supposed to have been flying into New York? Their sign said Ohio. *Hijo de puta*. He set down his bags and started digging in his pockets for his ticket.

“Carlos Estemadera!”

Carlos looked up to see a short Asian man wearing khaki slacks and bright white running shoes waving at him from beyond the assembled families and their confusing banner. Their eyes met, and the man’s face broke into a smile almost as bright as the shoes. Carlos turned to retrieve his bag from the ground, but instead found an exceptionally tall Asian woman placing it on a pushcart.

He watched in awe as she bent back up from the waist. She must have been a head taller than him. “Your carry-on?” She offered one of her long, thin hands.

“I—” At first, Carlos wasn’t sure what she had said—she had a rather thick accent—but he let her place his leather shoulder bag on top of his worn brown suitcase all the same.

“Carlos, baby!”

Carlos spun around to find himself uncomfortably close to the tan and toothy man. The guy beamed at him and grasped Carlos’ hand in a kind of death-grip, shaking it furiously.

“Carlos, it is such a pleasure. Can I just tell you, you look great.” Carlos doubted that—he felt jet-lagged and ugly—but the guy wouldn’t let go of his hand, so he just stood there, feeling like an idiot and smiling back.

“You must be Irg Oterb,” he said.

“In the flesh, my friend,” said Irg Oterb. “And I’ll tell you, Carlos, you can ask Doow here”—Oterb used his free hand to gesture to the towering woman—“my personal assistant, Doow Tsae. But I’ll be damned if I didn’t say to her—”

“How do you do?” said Carlos to—*what was it? Doow Tsae?* She bowed her head and let out a kind of giggle.

“I’ll be damned if I didn’t say, when we saw you walk through those doors, ‘Now this guy looks like a bullfighter.’ ” He raised his eyebrows at her. “Didn’t I, Doow?”

She giggled again, and nodded. “You did, Irg.”

“Goddamn right, I did.”

Irg Oterb finally quit giving Carlos’ hand the shake treatment and slapped him on the back. He snapped his fingers and draped his arm awkwardly over Carlos’ shoulder, shepherding him past the crowd of Far Hills Community Church members.

“So I’m not in Ohio?” Carlos said.

Irg Oterb looked at him blankly for a moment, then looked back at the church members’ sign and chuckled. “No, no, you’re in New York, all right. That crowd will just be here a couple of days to visit Ground Zero and yell at queers in Greenwich Village.” He shrugged. “Spend a few days in New York, my boy. You get used to being told you’re going to hell.”

Sounds like my kind of place, thought Carlos.

“But never mind all that. Can I just tell you, Yawg is so excited to meet you, Carlos. Hell, he wanted to come to the airport, but I told him that would be too much. ‘Just wait until dinner,’ I said. ‘At dinner we’ll all have a good, long chat, but not before then. The man’s got to rest.’ Isn’t that what I said, Doow?”

“It is, Irg.”

Carlos looked over his shoulder at the giggling Doow Tsae, who was watching him a little too intently. She was pushing the cart with his bags, her strides long like a giraffe’s.

He looked down and realized he still had his crumpled ticket in his hand. He contemplated its small printed letters, and then realized his brain was not helping him join them together into words. He was tired.

Irg Oterb still had his arm around Carlos’ shoulders, and led him out the large sliding doors of the airport toward a gold SUV. As they approached, an immaculate man with carob skin and white gloves hopped out of the driver’s seat and opened the rear passenger door.

Oterb grinned at the white-gloved man. “This is my driver, Nameer. Nameer, this is Carlos Estemadera. Hell of an actor.” Oterb leaned in close to Carlos’ ear and nodded towards Nameer. “I think he’s Somalian.”

“Hello,” said Carlos.

The man blinked and nodded.

Carlos lifted himself into the seat, laid his head back against the headrest and shut his eyes. He could hear Oterb’s driver open the hatch and load in his bags, and he heard Doow Tsae’s tittering as she climbed into the backseat next to him. Every sound seemed magnified, and Carlos realized this was because his head was throbbing, and each noise made the throbbing

worse. The pounding was arching between his temples, the electric pulse drowning out even his own thoughts.

When he opened his eyes, Carlos was relieved to see the SUV pulling up in front of what was apparently his hotel. He must have dozed off. He looked over at Doow Tsae, who was giving him another one of those unnerving stares.

“Home sweet home, Carlos baby,” said Oterb from the front seat.



Once the bellhop had brought up his bags to his room, Carlos set to perusing the mini bar. The Jack Daniels was beckoning him, but after letting his eyes trace the delicate glass bottle for a moment, he moved on. It was before dinner, after all, and he was jet lagged. Better to go with something light. A gin and tonic, perhaps. He grabbed the Tanqueray and enjoyed the light clink of the bottle as he set it on the marble countertop, then grabbed the tonic water and was similarly pleased with the solid thunk produced by the meeting of marble and plastic. He threw some ice in a highball glass, poured heavy on the gin, tossed in a lime wedge and stirring straw and took a smooth, glorious sip. *Dios*, he needed that.

He took a few steps over to the ample picture window and drank in the view of Manhattan. If it was anything, he thought, New York was a big place. He could count on one hand—probably one finger—the number of buildings in Málaga that rivaled any of the impressive feats of engineering on display here.

He looked down into the street below at the scurrying pedestrians, suicidal bike messengers and the cycling coil of taxis that formed a solid ring around the block. Every so

often one of the hotel bellmen would race like an ant up to a taxi and open its doors while his colleagues saw to withdrawing the passenger's bags from the trunk, then they would all hurry the goods inside, return to the sidewalk, touch antennae, and repeat the process. What a life, thought Carlos. He shook his head. To think that just weeks ago, he had been one of them. Making his living by a different means, *por supuesto*, but whether one was carrying luggage or acting in *telenovelas*, it was all still menial labor.

He was glad to be here, standing in this neatly arranged room, doing nothing but drinking a cocktail and watching the poor saps sweat their days away. It reminded him of those heady days in Barcelona as a young theatre actor, the feeling he had then of inevitable glory, of having the world on a string. Of course, back then he had dreamed of making committed art, art that would change the world, art that would speak to the ant-men below. He took another bitter sip of his drink. He had learned that seldom did the ant-men wish to be spoken to, and that there were few languages outside of advertising they seemed to understand.

He drained what was left of his drink. Now he was back on top. True, he wasn't making committed art, and he didn't have the world on a string, necessarily—he was, it seemed, working for some kind of strange Asian cartel making a movie about a pastime he didn't particularly care for, much less understand. Regardless, it was progress, and progress that deserved celebration in the form of a hot bath and a delicious cigar.

He stripped off his day-old clothes, donned the bathrobe that had been spread out for him on the king size bed, and strode to the bathroom. He was pleased to see the bathtub had been fully equipped with a variety of water jets—some of them adjustable!—to ensure his complete relaxation. He turned on the hot water, then noticed a small stereo sitting on one of the countertops. He flipped it on, and lush, soaring chamber music filled the room, punctuated by a

strong, melismatic tenor. He closed his eyes and let the music wash over him, breathing in deeply to feel the steam in his nostrils.

He flipped on the air jets and plopped down into the water, his cigar in one hand and his other hand reaching for the drink that lay sweating on the tub rim. He took a slow drink from the gin, and then a long puff from the cigar. The tenor was really singing now, and the strings were sweeping up behind him, and Carlos lay his head back against the wall, closed his eyes, and tried to focus on only the supreme pleasure of the moment.



Carlos woke with a start to the clattering of a phone on the bathroom wall, splattering sudsy water all over the fancy beige tiling around the tub. The soothing tenor had been replaced by a screeching soprano, and Carlos looked down to find the butt of his cigar and an empty glass both floating over his stomach in the bath water.

He grabbed a bar of soap that was also floating in the water and chucked it across the room. He was surprised when the soap connected, knocking the phone from its cradle and silencing its obnoxious prattle.

“Guess you still have it in you, *viejo*,” he said to himself. He placed his hands on either of the tub’s edges and hoisted himself upward, hoping his legs would lend some assistance. It took a moment, but they did, and he gingerly reached for the bathrobe hanging an arm’s length away.

With his body dry and robe safely in place, he walked over to the phone and placed it back on the cradle, though not before wiping soapy residue from the handle. He jumped when it immediately started ringing again.

“¿Quién habla?”

“Mr. Estemadera?”

Carlos didn’t recognize the voice. It sounded sophisticated, yet American. “Yes?” he said.

“My sincerest apologies for disturbing you, Mr. Estemadera,” the voice said, “but Mr. Irg Oterb requested that we inform you your party will be meeting in the lobby at six o’clock for dinner.”

Carlos looked around the bathroom for a clock. “What time is it now?” he said.

“It is exactly 5:33, sir.”

Hijo de una gran puta. Carlos slid the receiver over the cradle, then slammed his fist against the countertop. He let out a yell, first of frustration, because he hated to be rushed, and then of pain, because he had forgotten that the damn thing was marble.

After quickly shaving and donning one of his better suits, Carlos caught the elevator to the hotel lobby. The walls were plated with glass on all sides, and Carlos took the opportunity to admire himself from a few different angles. He didn’t like the side view—it drew a little too much attention to the bulge in his midsection—but all things considered, he was pleased. He was disappointed in himself for falling asleep like a slob in the tub, but he supposed he couldn’t be too hard on himself for being a little jet-lagged. Besides, the important thing was that he could still pull off a leisure suit better than most men half his age.

Carlos stepped out of the elevator and found himself standing next to Irg Oterb.

“Carlos, my boy!” said Oterb. He went to work shaking Carlos’ hand while his eyes gave Carlos’ outfit the once-over. “You remember Doow, of course.”

“Of course.”

Doow Tsae was wearing a giddy smile, along with a zebra print, floor length dress that somehow managed to make her look even taller. She was standing about five meters behind Oterb, towering over a man Carlos could only assume to be Yawg Nimeh.

Oterb grabbed Carlos’ elbow and tugged him over. “May I present Mr. Yawg Nimeh. Yawg, I give you the one and only Carlos Estemadera.” Oterb winked at Carlos.

Carlos let out an embarrassed chuckle. “*Mucho gusto*, Yawg.”

“The pleasure is mine.” Yawg Nimeh thrust his hand toward Carlos and gave him a firm shake.

Carlos had the odd feeling that Nimeh’s solid black eyes were not looking at him, but through him—an unsettling effect that, along with Nimeh’s eyes, was magnified by the man’s thick glasses. He wore a black beret, and his long hair flowed from underneath the beret into his beard in such a way that Carlos couldn’t help but compare it to a breaking tsunami.

“Well, let’s not stand around with our hands in our pockets, shall we?” Oterb clapped his hands and then briskly rubbed them together. “I’ve reserved places for us in the VIP section of the hotel lounge. We’ll have drinks from the bar and food from the restaurant—I’m told the cuisine is divine—and still have plenty of privacy so you creative types can do your thing.” He gave them all an eager grin. “Come, lads, ambrosia awaits!”

Carlos watched as Doow Tsae took a step and glided into place behind Oterb. Nimeh gave him a nod, so Carlos fell into step behind her.

They entered the lounge, and walked through another door—this one tinted—to the VIP room, which consisted of several smooth leather chairs situated around a circular wooden table. They each took a seat, and moments later a waiter with a white napkin over his arm came to collect drink orders. Nimeh ordered wine, Doow Tsae had a martini, and Irg Oterb a glass of club soda with cherries. You could tell a lot about a person by his or her drink, thought Carlos, who ordered bourbon.

“Gentlemen,” said Oterb, once the waiter had brought out their drinks. He held his glass of club soda in the air. “A toast, no? To your art.”

Doow Tsae and Yawg Nimeh raised their glasses and stared at Carlos.

“*Salud*,” said Carlos, and everyone drank.

“Well, fellas, I’ve done my job,” said Irg Oterb. “You’re here, you’re comfortable, and your glasses are full. This is what they pay me for.” He pointed to his head, and moved his hand in a rapid circle. “Now let’s see those gears turn.”

The room was quiet. Carlos dug a cigar from his breast pocket, cut the end off, then struck a match to light it. He leaned back in his chair and looked around the table. Irg Oterb was staring off into space somewhere between Carlos and Yawg, while Doow Tsae was staring at him and smiling shyly. Yawg Nimeh closed his eyes, stuck his nose in his wine glass and inhaled deeply. Carlos was unsure whether he was supposed to say anything, so he did what came naturally and took a long sip of his bourbon.

Nimeh abruptly set his glass down and opened his eyes, staring intently at Carlos.

“Carlos, have you any idea why you are here?”

Carlos was apprehensive. He had not prepared himself for an existential pop quiz. “To shoot a movie?” he ventured.

“You’re here, Carlos”—Yawg Nimeh went on, as though Carlos had said nothing—
“You’re here because you exude everything bullfighting is about. Strength, Passion.
Flamboyance.”

Carlos frowned at the last adjective.

“But above all, you exude Spanish-ness. When we were casting for this, we knew it had to be authentic. We knew we had to have a Spaniard. And when I sent Irg to research Spanish actors, he came back with a huge stock of movie footage. We watched hours. And in all those hours, I didn’t see a single actor who looked more Spanish than you in *El Espíritu del Gitano*.”

Doow Tsae giggled, and Carlos winced. He had thought, apparently naively, that America might be the one place he could go where that film wouldn’t hang over his head. In Málaga, he would frequently bring a woman home only to have her insist that he seduce her in character. He knew no gypsy songs, nor flamenco dances, he would have to explain, and the women were always gravely disappointed.

“Irg tells me you’ve read the script?” Yawg Nimeh’s voice was somehow simultaneously tinny and booming.

The question seemed simple enough, but Nimeh spoke with such force that Carlos was unsure of just how to respond. “Uh, yes,” he said, and then added, “sir.”

“And what did you think?”

Carlos was now sincerely alarmed. He had read the thing over brunch at El Zozo, a brunch which, as was his custom, he had washed down with more than one afternoon cocktail. Oterb had called it a tentative script, after all, and Carlos had only bothered to skim through it, making sure there was nothing that would offend his mother—though ultimately he figured his

Mamá would keep quiet so long as he bought her that clothes washer she was always going on about.

“It was good,” said Carlos. “A bit slow in part, perhaps, but—”

“Just forget about the script.” Nimeh waved a hand at him. “The script is dead.”

These people were more confusing all the time, Carlos thought.

“I want to do something new, Carlos. Something fresh. Something exciting.” Nimeh pushed his chair out and rose to his feet, then turned to face out the window of the VIP lounge. Carlos was fairly certain the window gave only onto an adjacent wall.

“I got to thinking about bullfighting.” Nimeh said to the wall. “The energy. The grace. The spontaneity.”

Spontaneity? Carlos thought. From the bullfights he had seen, it was a fairly predictable affair: a crazy man wearing a bizarre suit darted around in front of a huge animal with sharp horns until one or both of them lay dying in a pool of blood.

“Bullfights are unscripted.” Yawg was now pacing around the table. “So in attempting to bring something so spontaneous to the screen, what sense does it make to use a script at all?”

Carlos could remember only one bullfight that had veered from this predictable script: the last bullfight his parents had ever taken him to, when a bull had gotten free from its tormenters, leapt a fence and created havoc among the gathered spectators.

“In a bullfight, only the matador knows the grand plan behind it all. The rest—his *cuadrilla*, the bull, even the audience—can only guess, based on prior experience and the conventions of the art form, what might happen next. A perfect allegory for the act of filmmaking!” Yawg raised his wine glass in triumph.

It seemed to Carlos that on that particular occasion, it had really been the bull that had bucked the conventions of the art form, not the matador. The matador had just ended up looking like an incompetent fool.

“Is the story going to be the same?” said Carlos.

“If I told you that, Carlos, wouldn’t it ruin the aesthetic?”

Carlos failed to understand the aesthetic of making a movie with actors who had *ni puta idea* what they were doing. No, that was an aesthetic he did not understand at all.

“What I want is maximum spontaneity, Carlos. Maximum reaction. And that requires a minimum of rehearsal. So what we’re going to do is, for each scene, I’ll explain the basic motivations to the cast, and then we’ll just roll with it.”

Carlos was liking Yawg’s ideas less and less the more of them there were.

“We both know the problem with film these days, Carlos. No one wants to take any chances. But this project will change all that. We’re taking big risks, and we’re going to make a big, important film because of it.”

Doow Tsae was giving him those googly eyes again, and Carlos thought he felt one of her long legs brush against his shin under the table. She raised her eyebrows at him.

He needed another drink. “You guys seen the waiter?” he said, but before he’d even finished saying it, there was the waiter again, the same napkin draped over his arm.

“Another bourbon, my dear Carlos?” said Irg.

“Sure.”

The waiter nodded, and disappeared.

Carlos was completely at a loss. He had flown halfway across the world to shoot this film, and it was beginning to hit him that he had, quite possibly, made an enormous mistake.

Yawg Nimeh was apparently an unchecked egomaniac, Irg Oterb was an aloof glad-hander, and Doow Tsae appeared to have some strange girlish crush on him. To say nothing of the fact that they now wanted to shoot the thing without a script. It was difficult to imagine how things could get any worse.

The door to the VIP lounge opened, and a stunningly beautiful woman glided into the room. Her dark hair was pulled back into a tight, fluid ponytail and she wore a sheer black turtleneck.

“Ada!” Irg Oterb nearly fell over his chair as he leaped across the room to greet the woman. She bent down slightly to give him a kiss on each cheek.

“Carlos,” Irg turned around, his voice quivering with excitement, “please meet your co-star, the lovely Ada Vomissar.”

“Miss Vomissar.” Carlos did his best to rise majestically from his seat, then took her hand to kiss the tightly-pulled flesh between her knuckles. “The pleasure is entirely mine, I assure you.” He stared in wonder at her knee-high stiletto boots.

Irg was grinning wider than Carlos had yet seen. “Ada, this is Carlos Estemadera, our leading man.”

She nodded. “Mr. Estemadura.” Her thick, round lips formed gently around the words, her voice moist and husky. What was that accent, Russian?

“You know Yawg and Doow, of course.”

“Of course.” Ada Vomissar’s complexion quietly radiated, filling the VIP lounge with soft, cool light.

“Welcome, Ada,” said Yawg Nimeh. “How was your flight?”

“Wonderful.” She turned to Irg Oterb. “Thank you for having Nameer pick me up.”

“Oh, it was nothing.” Irg Oterb looked as serene as a castrated bull. Doow Tsae, Carlos noticed, had become very quiet.

“We were just discussing the ins and outs of the coming shoot, Ada,” said Yawg.

She leveled her gaze back at Carlos. “Is that so, Mr. Estemadera?”

Carlos was terrified. “Call me Carlos,” he said.

“All right, Carlos.” Ada Vomissar smiled, and her face warmed the room. “I suppose I’ll let you call me Ada.”

Joder, thought Carlos. Things had just gotten worse.



Flying in the small chartered plane from New York to San Rebat, Florida, Carlos found himself unaccompanied. Thankfully, Yawg had decided he wanted to confer with Ada about her role during the flight—Carlos didn’t understand why, since apparently they were no longer using a script, but it gave him more time to plan a successful strategy for getting her to go to bed with him, so he didn’t complain. Carlos had also managed to convince Irg Oterb that it was unnecessary for Doow Tsae to sit with him—in the event that he might need something, as Irg had said—and so was spared the unwanted attention of the giggling giraffe woman.

He sipped at the Tom Collins he’d prepared using the plane’s self-serve minibar and looked out the window. He was glad he could be alone with his thoughts. Ever since Yawg’s mention of *El Espiritu del Gitano* the night before, Carlos hadn’t been able to avoid rehashing that time in his life, a time he had mostly succeeded in putting out of his mind.

It was an idealistic time: Franco had died the previous year, and Spanish society was giddy with liberty. People were reexamining what it could mean to be Spanish, and that included what kind of art they could produce. Carlos was finishing up his theatre training in Barcelona, and he wanted to be a part of the new wave, part of something grand and special, something that would send the antiquated notions of government paternalism and social repression crashing down.

Instead, he had ended up starring in what would come to be regarded as one of the most regressive Spanish films of all time. His agent had assured Carlos that his role as a mysterious, handsome, yet fundamentally untrustworthy gypsy in *El Espiritu del Gitano* would be a gateway to the kind of stardom and influence that he so desired. The film was a period piece, a good way for Carlos to showcase his versatility, his agent had said, and would give him the credibility he needed to handpick challenging roles. But after it was released, Carlos found himself ridiculed for his participation in what one critic called “a swan song for the old, ultra-conservative Spain.”

Carlos would end up reprising his role as Federico the gypsy flamenco dancer in four other films. No one else was interested in casting him. And once every last *peseta* had been squeezed from the flamenco films, the only place for him to turn was the *telenovelas*. As his agent had explained then, the audience and aesthetic was more or less the same, and it would cement his name recognition among Spanish housewives.

It wasn't at all what Carlos had imagined for himself, but a guy had to make a living. It was still acting, he had to remember that. At least he wasn't working in a grocery store, which is what his classmates in *el instituto* had always predicted for him when he said he wanted to be an actor.

It was funny how many lectures Carlos had received from his former friends about artistic integrity when he did that first film. He wondered where those old friends were, and what they would say now—now that he had moved from glorifying one regrettable cultural stereotype to another. He knew what he would say to them: artistic integrity, he had learned, was a luxury very few could afford. Artistic integrity did not pay Carlos' rent, and it did not pay for his meals at El Zozo, and it certainly would not have paid for a flight across the Atlantic.

The plane was lowering its altitude, and Carlos looked down at the American landscape. He could see roads disappear at the horizon, and the glint of buildings in all directions. Yawg Nimeh had mentioned that the film was to be set in an unnamed Andalusian town—to improve the film's "universality," as he called it—but Carlos didn't understand how the director expected to pass off what he was seeing now for any Andalusian town he was aware of. The land was too flat, the buildings too spread out.

There was a kind of regularity, too, of precision, that just did not suggest anything remotely Spanish. Strip malls, golf courses, parking lots—everything seemed to fit into neat rectangles, which were then subdivided by more streets and more rectangular homes into even smaller rectangles. America looked like God had drawn it using a stencil.

In Málaga, there were no carefully measured rectangles, only sporadic splotches of green, tan and gray: thick oil paint splattered against a textured canvas. Carlos thought back to his friends from theater school and smiled. Here he was, finding work on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. He bet most of those self-righteous bastards had never even been outside of Spain.



The ride from San Rebat's small airport to the set was brief, and after arriving, Carlos wasted no time putting on his best "casual actor on set" outfit: a pair of comfortable slacks, a polo shirt, and a weather-beaten baseball cap. His hair was just the right length beneath the cap, he thought as he looked in the mirror, to keep him from looking too clean: he maintained a sexy air of unkempt mysteriousness, which was important should he happen to run into Ada Vomissar.

He was pleased to see the minibar in his trailer was amply stocked, and he wasted no time pouring himself a very tequila-heavy Tequila Sunrise. He then bounded out of his cabin into the Florida sun. It had been an early flight, and they didn't begin shooting until the next day, so Carlos thought he would take advantage of the downtime and take a look around the set. An afternoon stroll and a stiff drink—*la combinación más perfecta*, he said to himself.

He walked past a few other trailers, and when he saw the trailer of Ada Vomissar, veered towards the door. He considered knocking and inviting her to join him for a brief *paseo*, but then thought better of it. "Play it cool, Carlos," he said to himself. There will be time for that.

Not everyone, after all, was likely to be as primed to begin working as he. That was part of what made his presence so important, he supposed, for any production. It was that vigorous passion he brought to his work, that spark that could illuminate even the driest material. And it seemed more and more likely that this material would need a healthy dose of illumination. He lifted his glass for a drink and enjoyed the tinkling of the ice cubes swimming amidst the tequila and orange juice.

Carlos walked to what seemed like the center of the set-town and slowly turned himself in a circle, fixing his eyes only on whatever lay in front of him. He imagined his eyes as a

camera, capturing the stillness and simplicity of early 1900s Andalucía. It was a long, sweeping shot, one he would have contrasted with claustrophobic close-ups of his own chin gristle, readily switching between the two, perhaps as a way of signaling to the audience the gritty drama to come. He could imagine the slow build of the soundtrack behind him, creating still more tension, as the cuts between scenery and his intense gaze would become ever more frequent, until the audience could barely stand the suspense.

I should have been a cinematographer, Carlos thought. Or a composer. Or even a director. Anyone who had a role in shaping the final product would be preferable, he thought, to existing as another piece of scenery or equipment that need only be properly manipulated in the process of filming and editing.

Still, it would be his face up close in the frame, not the cinematographer's, nor the composer's, nor the director's, and that made Carlos feel more essential. After all, it wasn't everyone who had a face that lent itself so readily to tight close-ups; not everyone had a voice distinctive enough to hook a disinterested audience, as the audience of this film was sure to be. No, his were talents to be appreciated, too.

"Mr. Estemadera!" A small voice called from behind him.

He spun around in a manner he imagined to be smooth and graceful, and saw a pimple-faced Asian boy marching toward him.

"*Buenos dias*," said Carlos, flashing the kid his flashiest smile.

The kid hurried up to him, and Carlos was amused to see he had an enormous pair of headphones around his neck and a clipboard in his hands. "Good morning, sir."

Carlos waited for the kid to say something else. When he didn't, Carlos took another sip of his cocktail.

“Can I help you?” he said.

“I—” The kid shifted his weight and pushed his thick black glasses up his nose. “Uh—it’s—my name’s General. Nice to meet you, sir.”

Carlos blinked, then kicked his feet together and straightened his back before raising his left arm to salute the weird little guy. “Good morning, General. Sir.”

The kid looked embarrassed. “Look, I know it’s—my name is kind of funny.”

“Sorry, kid,” said Carlos, “I wasn’t making fun.” Though, of course, he had been. He took another drink. “That’s your real name, then? General?”

The kid shifted his weight. “Yeah. My parents—” He pushed up his glasses again. “My parents, when they moved here—well, not here, to New York—they thought I should have a strong name, you know.” He looked up at Carlos. “So I wouldn’t get made fun of.”

“Ah,” said Carlos. The poor, poor kid. “That was smart of them.”

The General sighed. “I guess.”

Carlos could tell this was something the kid went through a lot, and despite his own amusement, couldn’t bear to make the poor General suffer any more than he had to. “Well, never mind all that. Something I can help you with, kid?”

“Well, uh—actually, sir—” General flipped through some papers on his clipboard. “I just wanted you—er, you to know—I wanted to tell you that if you need anything, just let me know.”

“Oh. So you’re my assistant?”

“You could say that.”

“Well.” *What was it with all these Asians?* “Okay, then.” He moved to continue on with his tour of the set.

“Uh—” The kid seemed to be scrambling to get the words out. “Mr. Estemadera?”

“Yeah?”

“Listen, this is weird, but I—well, you’re just such a good actor.”

“Thanks, General.”

“Maybe you could, well, maybe—I mean I hate to ask, but—”

Carlos threw back the rest of his drink and wiped his mouth. “What is it, kid?”

“Maybe you could just, um, give me some pointers sometime?”

“Sure. Let’s start right now.” He gave General a grand smile. “Lesson number one: start drinking. Everything is better when you’ve been drinking.”

“Right. Drinking.” General scribbled something down on his clipboard. “Thanks, Mr. Estemadura.”

“Don’t mention it. And listen, kid.” Carlos bent down so he was closer to eye level with the boy. “Is there some name I can call you besides General?”

The kid’s face lit up. “My friends all call me by my last name, sir. Li.”

“Okay, Li.” Carlos stood back up, and straightened his cap. “Then that’s what I’ll call you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Estemadera.” And the kid was off, scampering down the road and making notes on his clipboard.

Carlos wandered back to his trailer for another Tequila Sunrise and one of his Partagas Rosados, then returned to the set to give it a more thorough inspection. As he approached the buildings—well, not all of them were buildings exactly; some were little more than two-dimensional facades—Carlos had to admit that the set design wasn’t half bad. He looked at his surroundings, and though they appeared temporary to the trained eye, there was a sense he had also of the set being a real, tangible place—a place with its own rules, its own decorum, its own

civic expectations. There was a possibility that, through a camera lens, everything would look damned realistic.

At the center of the town was Yawg Nimeh's bullring, tall and white in the midday Florida sun. Carlos sauntered toward it, pulled his hat low over his eyes and squinted. As he approached, he imagined a camera positioned below him at just the right angle so as to frame his squared jaw within one of the glinting arches. He raised his hand to his mouth to remove his cigar, slowly wet his lips, then repositioned the cigar, imagining the husky aura of the smoke encircling his head. *General Li*, he said to himself. What the hell kind of name was that?

He strolled through one of the arches into the ring, and then stopped. About three dozen men in flannel shirts and white hard hats were gathered around inside, and with his entry they had all turned to look at him. It appeared they were at work spreading sand around the ring: most held half-open bags they were dragging across the circular surface, and a couple men sat atop small tractors that each had some kind of smoothing attachment, presumably to even out any lumps in the sand.

"Hello," Carlos said.

The assembled workmen looked at him blankly.

"*Hola*," Carlos said again.

Still no response. Looking around the crowd, it occurred to Carlos that they didn't look much like Americans. And, though they were short, they didn't look much like any Mexicans he had met, either.

His only guess was that the origin of these workers had something to do with the shared Asian heritage of Yawg Nimeh, Irg Oterb, Doow Tsae, and, apparently, General Li. He hated to

feel like a chauvinist, but the truth was they all did look alike, even if most of them had managed to purge whatever accent they once might have had.

One of the men said something unintelligible to one of the other men, and they all started laughing. Not these guys, apparently. These guys didn't even speak English to begin with.

Carlos set his drink on the ground, then put his palms together and gave them an awkward bow. There was a fresh round of laughter as the men made gestures and exclamations he did not understand. The longer he stood there, the more graceless he felt, and so Carlos opted to leave the strange little men and their little white hardhats behind. He leaned down to retrieve his cocktail, but saw a thin film of sand had already settled on its surface. *No importa*, he thought, vowing to return to his trailer for another drink; and once there, to stay in it the rest of the day.

He had nothing against Asians—he had no doubt they had made great contributions to human progress in one way or another—but the whole thing was starting to feel more than a little strange. A few more drinks, and a long, solid sleep would do him good. He was sure it would all work itself out.



The next morning, Carlos was sleeping off a hangover. He had, perhaps, slightly overdone it upon returning to his trailer the night before. But he wasn't concerned—though it was the first day of filming, he knew it would take some time to get the lighting right with the second team, and so he only worried himself with sending for General Li via his in-trailer pager. Less than a minute later there was a knock at the door.

“*Pasa*,” Carlos mumbled, and nothing happened. He opened his eyes, blinked a few times, and remembered he was no longer in a place where Spanish was the first language. He tried again: “Come in.”

General Li burst through the door. “M-Mr. Estemadera,” said the kid, all trembling speech and glasses. “You called?”

Carlos was glad the kid still spoke English, unlike the workmen last night. “Yeah, *niño*, I did.” He felt silly, sprawled on his bed in his underwear and a loose fitting T-shirt, but he supposed he would have to get used to the presence of the boy in circumstances like these—it was part of what filmmaking entailed. “Do us all a favor and fetch me four aspirin and a Bloody Mary.”

“Uh—sure—OK, sir.” General Li scribbled on his clipboard and gave Carlos what was apparently supposed to be a smile.

They stared at each other for a moment. “¿*Algo más?*” said Carlos.

“Oh. No, sir.” Li quickly turned to walk out the door, then crashed into Carlos’ end table, spilling his cigar box and its contents all over the floor.

“I am *so* sorry, sir,” the kid said between jagged breaths. Carlos began to feel like he was watching a terrible sit-com in which he was the main character, constantly frustrated by the parade of fools around him. He could only imagine what further pitfalls he would be subjected to, and what terrible pratfalls this idiot kid had in store for him.

“Don’t worry about it, kid.” Carlos struggled into a sitting position, then successfully planted his feet on the ground. “I’ll take care of the cigars. You just get the drink.”

“Right.” Li gave him an awkward smile and nearly fell down the steps of the trailer on his way out the door. He came back in a few minutes, and Carlos promptly sucked down the Bloody Mary and sent Li out for another one.

After a few more hours spent recuperating, and a few more Bloody Marys, General Li brought word that the proper lighting had been established and they were finally ready for him.

“Yawg says to wear suit number three,” said Li.

Carlos flipped through the outfits in his trailer closet, and saw that they were all more or less the same. They were all ceremonial bullfighting suits, they were all composed of exceedingly bright colors, and they were all decorated with enough sequins to damage one’s eyesight.

Carlos found it odd that there was not a single normal suit among them. Did Yawg Nimeh believe that bullfighters wore these absurd outfits constantly? That they went to the bank, or the post office, or out for coffee in such ridiculous attire? In the script, Carlos was certain, there had been scenes that took place outside of a bullring. Or had those been thrown out all together with the ushering in of Yawg’s asinine new vision?

Carlos looked at the tags affixed to each suit until he found Number Three, a blood red suit with a sky blue cummerbund and gold sequined cresting across the chest and shoulders. He then picked the odd little matador hat off the hook next to the suits and marched out into what had become a muggy Florida day.

As he neared the set, Carlos saw a large crowd of stagehands milling about. He was unsettled, though not entirely surprised, at the realization that most of them looked like they would have found themselves nicely at home on a delegation from the world’s most populous country.

So he was in the midst of an Asian cabal, after all. Nothing wrong with that, of course, but wouldn't the cheaper thing have been to hire local help?

"Here he is now!"

Carlos was startled by a voice raining down on him from above. He held his hand to his brow to block the glare from the sun as he sought out its origin, and saw Yawg Nimeh perched atop a tall riser with a bullhorn in his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our bullfighter *par excellence*."

The riser must have been a good ten feet tall, which made Yawg Nimeh's possession of a bullhorn all the more disconcerting—he was up too high to dislodge it.

Carlos looked around at the assembled crowd and tipped his hat. There was a brief silence as everyone turned to stare at him for a moment, and then they all turned back to their respective conversations.

Surrounded by a crowd of at least ten short extras was Ada Vomissar, who managed to effuse her elegance over all of them. There was a kind of awe in the gaze of each of the men—they had obviously never seen features as crisp as hers, nor eyebrows that arched so sharply, nor lips that parted so sublimely. To say nothing of her tremendous *tetas*. No, Carlos had never met a woman of Asian descent nearly as well endowed as Ada, and he pitied the wives of these men who would subsequently never measure up in the eyes of their husbands.

"Carlos, man"—Yawg Nimeh's voice clicked on again in the bullhorn—"You are killing that suit."

I am? he thought. "Oh. Thanks."

“Let’s get down to business.” Yawg Nimeh’s riser was now extending out over where Carlos stood. “In this shot, you’re meeting Ada’s character—your principal love interest—for the first time.”

How fitting. Carlos looked over at Ada, who was piercing right through his chest with her exquisite green eyes. He was, all of a sudden, very nervous, and tried his best to disguise the fact that he was wiping his sweaty palms on the back of his pants.

“It’s coming on the heels of a great triumph of yours in the ring. She’s trying to make it through the adoring throng to speak with you.”

Sounds about right, Carlos thought. “What do I say?”

“Just improvise,” clicked the voice. “If we need to, we’ll do it again.”

Carlos could not believe a real studio had actually given this man the money to make a feature film.

“Whatever you say,” he said.

“Exactly,” Yawg Nimeh’s shrill voice clicked back.



Late that evening, Carlos was taking advantage of some alone time in his trailer to have a drink and enjoy a fine cigar. That day’s shooting had not gone well, and Carlos felt he deserved the indulgences to make up for it.

He was doing his best to push it all from his mind: the twenty-odd takes of his and Ada’s initial encounter, the way her upper lip had curled when she asked if he had bothered to shower that day, Yawg Nimeh’s hard gaze locked on to his every movement throughout the ordeal, and

most disturbing of all, the horde of Asian extras that had swarmed around his midsection in celebration of his latest tauromachian triumph. Carlos had felt like a kind of Kong amidst them, but Spanish Kong of the tribe of short Chinese extras was not a role that particularly excited him, nor did it provide consolation for what had otherwise been a disastrous afternoon.

The one consolation he did have was the memory of Ada Vomissar, who had managed to look enchanting even in her oversized peasant's garb. The long session had at least given him plenty of fodder for his imagination, he thought, as he undid his pants and began to masturbate.

He was enjoying one particularly nice image of Ada's parted lips when there was a knock on the door.

"Busy!" said Carlos, and moved to cover himself with a sheet. He was relieved to see he had locked the door on his way in.

"Um, hi—er, excuse me, Mr. Estemadera." General Li's voice whimpered its way through the wood.

"Yes, Li?" said Carlos, poised to resume where he had left off.

"Sir, I was just, um, wondering if you needed anything."

"Doing just fine, Li."

"I thought maybe I could fill—um—refill your minibar."

"Maybe in a little bit, Li. I'm rehearsing lines."

"But I thought you didn't have lines, sir."

How the hell did General Li know that? Carlos sensed a rapid softening between his legs.

"There's another tip for you, Li," Carlos said loudly. "A true actor rehearses lines, even when he doesn't have any."

“Oh.” The voice on the other side of the door sounded perplexed.

“Listen, Li.” To make the kid leave, he’d have to improvise. “Come to think of it, I was hoping you could pick me up something from one of the Mexican markets around here.”

“Oh, I’d be happy to, sir.” The voice sounded revived, purposeful.

“Great,” said Carlos. “I need something called *musulman*. They should have it in the deli.”

“Okay, sir.” Carlos could hear General Li making notes on his clipboard. “I’ll be back with that as soon as I can.”

“There’s no hurry, Li,” said Carlos, but he knew the kid had already scampered off.

He felt a little bad, having sent Li to buy “Muslim” from the deli, but hopefully it would keep the kid occupied long enough for him to take care of business. The dull ache he felt below told Carlos that was a necessity.

All in good time, he thought, and trotted half-naked across his trailer to the minibar. Might as well set the mood with another drink. He poured a cognac slowly over ice and set to thinking about Ada Vomissar again.



The first week or so of filming proceeded in similar fashion. Carlos slept through the morning, normally having stayed up too late drinking, smoking and masturbating the night before, then was awakened around lunch time by General Li, who informed him which of his *trajes* he was to wear that day, then wandered on to the set to shoot and reshoot a scene until

Yawg Nimeh had what he judged to be enough footage. Then Carlos would start drinking again, which inevitably led to the other two vices.

Carlos had never shot this much, or at least not so much in such a repetitious fashion, and he was already getting tired. He began having that first drink earlier and earlier in the day, while waking up later and later, in the hope that the combination of more alcohol and more sleep would keep his creative juices flowing. Alcohol, as far as he was concerned, was a singularly creative juice in its own right, so perhaps the key was just to stay sufficiently juiced, period.

No matter how much he drank, however, Carlos could not seem to succeed in his primary goal of fraternizing with Ada Vomissar. He had knocked at her trailer every night after his shooting had wrapped and he'd had time to remove the absurd bullfighter's suit and hat, but she never seemed to be there. What could have been keeping her so busy?

This was just the question on Carlos' mind one night when he was knocking on her door between nips off his flask.

"To what do I owe the surprise?" Ada's voice shot out from behind him and the shock sent his brain reeling.

"Oh," he said, fumbling to regain his composure. "Well. I was just, you know, knocking—"

"Is there something I can help you with?" Her lovely curvature and high cheekbones were evident even in her hideous costume.

Carlos thought of the many things he would be glad to let her help him with. "They have you shooting this late?" he said.

“I’m not wearing these clothes for fun, Carlos.” Besides the ugly outfit, she wore a sheen of sweat that made her skin all the more radiant. She stepped past him and unlocked her trailer. “Would you like to come in?”

Carlos wanted to come in. He also wanted to watch Ada’s shapely rear make its way up her trailer’s steps. “Why are you still shooting this late?” he said. Good to keep up conversation as a cover.

“We’re working on character development. Yawg wants some scenes to capture my character in her own environment.” Ada pulled out a pair of barrettes and undid the bun holding up her dark brown hair. It took a luxurious tumble to rest across her shoulders.

If Yawg was so interested in character development, Carlos thought, he ought to give their characters names. But no, not only was the town nameless, its inhabitants were as well. To Yawg, this made the film “more capable of revealing universal truths.” To Carlos, it was just stupid.

“How many takes has he got you shooting?”

Ada had stepped behind a fold out blind set up in front of her closet. Carlos was enveloped by the sounds of her undressing, and looked for a place to sit so that he might disguise the growing in his pants.

“Oh, just a couple.” Most of Ada’s outfit was now draped across the top of the blind. Carlos pulled out his flask and took a hearty swig. He tried to concentrate on the burn of the whiskey down his trachea in order to distract himself from the specter of an absurdly beautiful woman now standing naked just a few feet from him.

“Yawg’s stage directions are pretty easy when you’re working with him one-on-one.”

Yawg Nimeh was working with her one-on-one? Nimeh hadn't done that with Carlos. Wasn't he the lead actor?

Ada Vomissar emerged from behind the blind wearing a shiny orange jumpsuit. *Vaya por Dios*. The woman had curves like the back of a bull, and the jumpsuit hid none of it.

Carlos coughed. "Would you like to join me for a drink?" He tried to stand in such a way that the bulge in his pants would be less evident.

"I'm afraid I can't, Carlos. She pouted with those thick red lips and Carlos thought he might be crushed between them. "Yawg wants me up early for more work in the morning."

"Of course," said Carlos. He was beginning to wonder if Yawg Nimeh didn't have designs of his own on the busty Russian.

"I'd love a drink from that flask, however."

Carlos had forgotten he was still holding the thing. He handed it over, and watched in amazement as she took a smooth, sustained pull. Could the girl be more perfect?

After a quick goodnight, he returned to his trailer, and pondered the lipstick stain she had left around the lip of his flask. He kissed the cold metal and drifted off to sleep, pondering the similarities between bulbous Russian architecture and Ada Vomissar's bulbous torso.



Carlos woke up early the next day—at least, early for him—and felt better rested than he had in some time.

True, he had awakened with whiskey soaking through his pillow as a result of falling asleep with his flask uncapped, but it was a small price to pay for the memory of Ada Vomissar's eager quaff. He'd dreamt of her plump lips all night long.

After taking a moment to pleasure himself, Carlos fumbled around his trailer for something to wear. It was the first time he'd awakened before his call to the set in days, and he had almost forgotten how uncomfortable the damn *trajes* were in comparison to regular clothes, he'd been wearing them so much. It was nice, not having to ram his *cojones* into a pair of unforgiving velvet pants first thing after waking up. Let the boys breathe a little bit.

He hopped down the stairs of his trailer and opened the door to let in some fresh air, and was subsequently bowled over by an overeager General Li. The kid looked stunned, and his clipboard and headphones were resting on the ground as a result of the impact.

"Oof," said Carlos. Last night's whiskey burbled in his stomach.

"Oh, I—" General Li helped Carlos up and dusted off his shirt. "I am *so* sorry, Mr. Estemadera. Sir."

"That's okay, Li." Carlos put his hand on the kid's shoulder. "But it does bring to mind a good tip for you: take it slow."

Li scrambled to pick up his clipboard, and clicked his pen to write. "Take. It. Slow. Perfect." He frantically picked up his headphones and jostled them back into place. Carlos could see his advice might take some time to settle in.

"Anyway, sir. The reason I was coming to your trailer was to tell you—er, well, I was coming for two reasons." General Li pushed up his thick black glasses, and Carlos could see beads of sweat forming on the boy's forehead. "I was going to refill your whiskey, and—"

"That's my boy," said Carlos.

“Uh, well—thank you, sir. The other reason was to tell you the bulls have arrived, and they’re going to transfer them to the bullpen soon.”

“Oh?” With General Li around, Carlos could never want for superfluous information.

“Mr. Nimeh thought you might like to watch.”

“He did?”

“He said he thought it might stir up the Spaniard in you, or something like that.”

Stir up the Spaniard in him? What the hell did that mean?

Carlos shrugged. While it didn’t sound enthralling, he supposed that, from a safe distance, he could appreciate the spectacle of the bulls’ arrival. Besides, he thought, it might give him another opportunity to see Ada, which was an exciting prospect. So Carlos put on a pair of shoes and headed toward the bullring.

When he got there, he was dismayed to see Irg Oterb on the mobile riser, clutching Yawg Nimeh’s bullhorn.

“Carlos, baby!”

He wished someone would have had the foresight to keep such a device from such a man as Oterb.

“Long time no see!”

He trudged up the stairs to the top of the riser and found himself in close proximity to the irreducible trio of Oterb, Doow Tsae, and Yawg Nimeh. He shook hands with each of the men and bowed to Doow Tsae, who hadn’t stopped giggling since he was in view. Ada Vomissar was, unfortunately, nowhere in sight.

“How’s our star?” said Oterb, who stepped behind Carlos and began rubbing his shoulders in a vigorous and unpleasant manner.

“O.K.,” said Carlos. Why hadn’t he refilled his flask before leaving his trailer?

“You feel tense, buddy.” Oterb kept it up with the rubbing. “You need a massage? Doow gives heavenly ones. Isn’t that right, Doow?”

More tittering sprang from Oterb’s leggy assistant. “That’s right, Irg.”

Carlos thought it best to quash such an idea quickly. “I don’t—”

“Carlos has been working hard,” Yawg Nimeh said, and for once, Carlos was glad to hear him speak. “His director is a little overzealous with the number of takes he likes to shoot.”

Damned right, Carlos thought. “Well, I wouldn’t say—”

“Oh, Carlos. Don’t mince words. I know I’m a slavedriver.”

Carlos had learned in many prior circumstances that when an employer professed to favor candor, it was best to keep quiet, so he did.

“What our lead actor—talented as he is—doesn’t understand,” Yawg said, “is that it’s all part of the plan.”

Plan? What plan?

Nimeh put an arm around Carlos’ shoulders. *Just so long as he doesn’t start rubbing*, Carlos thought.

“You see, Carlos, the more tired you are, the more in touch with your reactive mind you become.”

Doow Tsae started giggling. Carlos wanted to grab both sides of Yawg Nimeh’s beret and yank down as hard as he could. *Reactive mind?* He would show this crackpot reactive mind.

“Brilliant!” said Irg Oterb, “I’ll tell you, Carlos, is this man a visionary or what?”

Jesucristo. They might as well just start fellating each other and get it over with.

The crew below jacked up the riser so that the four had a clear view into the bullpen. Carlos saw the bullring about a hundred meters beyond the pen, gleaming white and imperial in the muggy San Rebat morning. A crowd of extras and stagehands was gathered on the far side of the pen, and from their faces, Carlos could tell they were keen on seeing a live bull up close.

Idiotas. They wouldn't be so keen if they knew what the creatures were capable of. Though he supposed he couldn't blame them: Carlos himself had never fully understood what bulls were capable of, either, until that last bullfight with his parents when one of the beasts had jumped the barrier and sent dozens of his classmates and neighbors shrieking past him.

"Look!" Doow was pointing to the middle of the bullpen, where Carlos saw a trim man wearing close-fitting black pants and a matching long-sleeved shirt. He kicked his feet together and bowed towards the riser.

"Who is that?" said Carlos.

"That's Carlos," said Irg Oterb.

Carlos furrowed his brow. "What?"

"Carlos. The bull wrangler."

"His name is Carlos?"

"Some coincidence, huh? But get this." Oterb elbowed Carlos in the ribs. "His name isn't the only thing you two share."

"It's not?" said Carlos.

The bull wrangler turned to his audience on the other side of the bullpen and bowed again.

"You're both Spanish." Oterb grinned at him. "*Compatriotas*, as they say."

Carlos couldn't explain why, but he found himself severely annoyed that there was now another man on the set who not only happened to be Spanish, but also happened to be named Carlos. It was a common name, after all, there was no reason to be upset. But it almost made him feel like some grander force was having a laugh at his expense.

Carlos saw two men standing atop a large metal cage adjacent to the open gate of the bullpen. The bull wrangler raised his right arm, and the men lifted up the partition between the pen and the cage. There was a kind of explosion, and a gasp from the crowd, as a bull burst into the pen. Carlos Estemadera feared for his namesake, but the bull wrangler simply extended his left arm, palm out towards the bull, and the thing stopped dead in its tracks just centimeters from physical contact.

There was another gasp from the crowd on the other side of the pen, and then a loud cheer. The noise startled the bull, and it charged the wall, but the bull wrangler merely tapped it between the eyes and it dropped down to its knees.

"My God," said Irg Oterb. "He's incredible!"

The bull wrangler performed a few more tricks for what had quickly become an adoring public, and then climbed out of the bullpen.

"You two should meet," said Irg Oterb, and he dragged Carlos down from the riser to the edge of the enthusiastic crowd, where Carlos the bull wrangler was shaking hands and signing autographs. People were even getting their pictures taken with the guy.

One of those people was Ada Vomissar, Carlos realized. Flaming horns of jealousy plunged into his belly.

"I saw the whole thing from the wall over there," Ada said to the bull wrangler. She turned to one of the extras in the crowd. "It was incredible, don't you think? Just incredible."

“I’ll say,” said Carlos Estemadera, flatly. He enjoyed the look of surprise on Ada’s face.

“Carlos Romero, meet Carlos Estemadera,” said Irg Oterb.

At least their *apellidos* weren’t the same. The bull wrangler extended his hand, and Carlos shook it.

“Romero. Isn’t that a great last name?” said Ada Vomissar.

“Lovely,” said Carlos. “Quite a few stunts you know with that thing, huh, Romero?”

Isn’t that a great last name? she had said. He couldn’t believe it.

“Actually, between Spaniards”—Romero winked at him—“bulls can be pretty manageable if you treat them right. If you’re not smearing their eyes with petroleum jelly and doping them, which is what usually happens before a bullfight.”

“Is that so?”

“*Sí, señor*. Most people don’t understand that bulls are gentle creatures at heart.”

The bull that had stormed the bleachers all those years ago had not seemed too gentle, Carlos thought. “I’d rather keep my distance, all the same.”

“Oh, but *amigo*,” said Romero, “you miss so much of the beauty that way.”

“Yeah, well....” Carlos tried to think of something caustic to say.

Irg Oterb clapped his hands. “I didn’t need to be any closer to see the beauty of that performance, I can tell you that much!”

Carlos Romero bowed. “Thank you, Irg.”

“No, thank you, Carlos,” said Oterb.

Yawg Nimeh patted Carlos Romero on the back. “Yes, thank you, Carlos. You’ll have to teach me some of those tricks. They might come in handy when dealing with certain headstrong actors.”

With that, the whole bunch—Nimeh, Oterb, Doow Tsae, Carlos Romero and Ada Vomissar—had a long, hearty laugh. Carlos Estemadera didn't find any of it humorous at all.



The arrival of the bull turned out to be the most exciting thing to happen on set for days. Filming became more and more pedantic, and Carlos found it necessary to engage in more and more self-medication just to make it through. He would have his first Bloody Mary by nine or ten in the morning—he had started setting his alarm for it—and would follow it up with a healthy dose of aspirin, and then repeat.

He truly hadn't the slightest idea why he was being paid so much; none of the "reactive mind" nonsense Yawg Nimeh was always talking about even resembled something Carlos would have called "acting." Still, if the eccentric director wanted to piss away \$250,000 on Carlos when he could've just hired a bum off the street, that was his business.

In spite of all the amenities, though—his salary, the well-stocked minibar, a seemingly endless supply of fine cigars—Carlos felt himself sliding into an ugly funk. Not only was he bored, he was frustrated: Ada Vomissar was either too busy or too interested in another Spaniard named Carlos to pay much attention to him. Doow Tsae would have slept with him in a heartbeat, he was sure of that, but he just could not bring himself to imagine her gangly body naked in front of him. He was becoming convinced that the remainder of his time on set would be characterized by excessive masturbation and rampant malaise.

The costume designer was doing his best to confirm that conviction, Carlos thought, as he examined the resplendent orange polyester and lime green cresting of his *traje de luces*. He

squinted down at the hundreds of sequins swirling across the jacket. It was enough to make any reasonable person depressed.

“Okay, people. Places, please.” Yawg Nimeh bleated through his bullhorn. Carlos thought the frizz sticking out from under the director’s beret looked like the waves breaking in one of those old Japanese prints.

“Somebody give Carlos that *capote*.” A squat member of the crew waddled up to Carlos and handed him a large pink cape.

Behind Carlos were three more Asian-looking men stuffed into *trajes*. They looked uncomfortable and unconvincing. Beyond those three was a small crowd of extras—probably about three dozen, by Carlos’ estimate—crammed into a small section of the faux bullring. Though he had seen the magic directors of *telenovelas* were able to achieve with soft focus—there was a beautifying effect on the actresses he worked with that he could only describe as being akin to a very large consumption of alcohol—Carlos was more than a little skeptical that such a small crowd could be passed off as a crowd of thousands. And he still did not understand the logic of populating a movie set in Spain with people who looked nothing like Spaniards.

“Carlos!” Yawg Nimeh’s tinny, amplified voice surrounded him. “Let’s shoot this thing.”

“Sure,” said Carlos. “What am I doing?”

“The camera is the bull, okay?” said Nimeh. “You’re going to wave the *capote* at it, and it’s going to charge you.”

Carlos frowned. How could a camera be a bull? He looked around until he saw a camera sitting maybe thirty feet away on a small cart, with what looked like a motor attached to it. That was how, apparently.

“Later in editing we’ll add some wide shots of one of the bulls charging a stuntman. This is just to get close-ups on you, with the crowd in the background.”

Carlos turned to look at the three idiots behind him. They shrugged. The crowd behind them was cheering.

“Okay,” said Carlos.

“Good.” The voice clicked on again. “And, action!”

Trying his best not to look as ridiculous as he felt, Carlos started swishing around the pink *capote*. The little cart with the camera on top made an awful noise, and then was zooming towards him much faster than he had anticipated.



When Carlos came to, he was laid out on the bed in his trailer. He had an ice pack wrapped around his head, but when he stretched, he realized that the ice should have been placed on his left thigh; that was what really ailed him. He lifted up his bedsheet to look and found a bruise the size of four of his fists halfway between his groin and his knee. The bruise was hard and deep, deep purple, and in the middle there was a ring of pure black about the size of a camera lens. He remembered the way the camera had hurtled toward him, but could not remember the impact.

There was a knock and his trailer door began to open. Carlos quickly replaced the sheet over his exposed lower half, then turned his head toward the wall and pretended to sleep.

Two voices were whispering to each other. One of them he was sure was Irg Oterb, which meant the other was more than likely Doow Tsae. Just as long as Yawg Nimeh didn't show up. Carlos thought he might kill the man if he saw him.

"He looks all right to me," said Irg Oterb, who seemed to be having great difficulty keeping his voice at such a low level. "Where did you say the thing hit him?"

"His leg," said Doow Tsae. "He has very ugly bruise on thigh, right where lens hit him."

José María Jesús. Had the Asian giraffe taken his pants off? Was there no qualified medical staff on set?

Irg Oterb was sniffing, or snickering, or both.

"Shhhh," said Doow Tsae.

If she had taken his pants off, that meant she had seen his purple polyester briefs. Which meant, if Doow was a typical woman, that she had already told Ada about them. *Qué vergüenza.*

"I'm sorry," said Irg. "I just don't think I've seen anything like this happen before." And he snickered some more.

That's because it's not supposed to happen, thought Carlos, gritting his teeth. This is what stunt men are for. Stunt men are the ones who get hit by murderous cameras and end up in bed with a severely bruised, if not broken, thigh. Not leading actors.

"Carlos," Doow whispered. She touched his shoulder. "Carlos, wake up."

Carlos smacked his mouth and blearily opened his eyes, then turned his head toward Doow and blinked a few times. "*¿Sí?*"

"Carlos, em...you are okay?" Doow smiled at him, and then, predictably, giggled.

"I'll be all right. But I think the ice might do more good on my leg."

"Of course," said Doow. "I just thinking your head might hur—"

“My head didn’t get hit at sixty *kilómetros por hora* by a camera strapped to a motorized cart.”

“And thank God for that!” said Irg Oterb, who set to cackling again. “You’re a champ, Carlos. *El campeón.*”

Carlos winced. “I’m just hoping I won’t have to prove it too many more times.”

“Don’t worry, Big C.” Irg slapped him on the back. “Those guys in charge of that camera? Already sacked.” He rubbed his palms together. “You just can’t get good help anymore, you know?”

“Sure.” Carlos imagined that one could get good help, particularly if one were inclined to look outside of his or her bizarre production cartel, but decided it best to keep that to himself.

The ice pack successfully removed from his head, Carlos began to slide it under the sheet.

“I help, Carlos?” Doow Tsae spoke as if in a panic.

“No, that’s okay,” said Carlos. “I can do it.”

“What one can do, two can always do better!” Irg Oterb flashed that unnervingly white smile and laughed. “Speaking of, Carlos: I was thinking, after what happened today, maybe it would be good for you to get off set for the night. You know, just take a break, blow off some steam, so you can come back refreshed tomorrow. I’d hate to see any lingering resentment hurt your performance.”

“What the hell, why not?” His lingering resentment was more likely to hurt Yawg Nimeh, Carlos thought.

“That’s my boy,” said Irg. “Now I’m sure Doow here would be happy to go with you, in case you need help with anything.”

The leggy Asian mutant winked at Carlos.

“Yeah, that’s okay, Irg,” said Carlos. “I’ll be all right on my own.”

“ ‘Course you will.” Oterb grabbed Carlos’ shoulder and squeezed. “Enjoy yourself, pal.”



Looking out at the sleepy streets of San Rebat from the backseat of Irg Oterb’s SUV, Carlos planned to do just that. He had played the injury card well, hobbling over to Ada Vomissar’s trailer and bandying about his wounds, and she had miraculously agreed to join him for a drink. She was now strapped into the seat next to him, and for a moment, Carlos understood the appeal of America—a fat, comfortable car, an impressive trophy of a woman, and mile upon mile of available roads on which to brandish the two about.

Still, with her now just an arm’s reach from him, Carlos found it difficult to concentrate on the face above Ada’s arresting figure, much less initiate conversation.

“Hey, Nameer.”

Irg Oterb’s Somalian driver looked at Carlos in the rear view mirror. “Yes, sir?”

“How about a little music?”

“Certainly.”

Carlos turned to Ada and attempted to smile, but she was looking out the window.

“Leave it here, Nameer.” The driver had found a station run by Cuban exiles, and it made Carlos a little homesick to hear his native tongue in such ready supply—though of course the Cubans were mangling much of the pronunciation.

He turned to Ada. “It’s too bad you don’t speak Spanish,” he said cheerfully. He would charm this Russian yet.

Ada gave him a vague smile, so he decided to press on. “You know, you and the Cubans probably have a lot in common.”

Her eyes grew wide, and Carlos knew he was in trouble.

“The Cubans?” Her tone was measured. “You think Ukrainians and Cubans have a lot in common?”

“Well, I—”

“Does Cuba have a secret police that disappears people and kills them? Are there statues of Fidel Castro everywhere that cost as much as feeding whole neighborhoods?” Her tone was now approaching hysterical. “Did Cuba go bankrupt trying to be a world superpower?” Ada Vomissar opened her pastel handbag, pulled out a tissue and spit in it. Then she folded up the tissue and placed it neatly back in the handbag.

Carlos looked in the rear view mirror and saw Nameer’s eyes dart back to the road.

“I—”

“Let’s just not talk about it.” She was glaring out the window.

Qué fuerte, thought Carlos. *Y qué mujer*. Though he felt as though he had just been slapped, something about Ada’s outburst made her even sexier. The way she had spit into that napkin, he thought. Of course, the evening was now off to a disastrous start, but that had never dissuaded Carlos before. And besides, these Russkie women liked a strong man, a man with opinions, a man that could piss them off. There was no reason to think it was a lost cause.

Once they had found a reasonably classy establishment—of which there were very few in San Rebat—and ordered their first round of drinks, Carlos decided to try again.

“So how did you get suckered into all this?” he said.

“Into all what?”

“You know, this. The movie. Everything. How does a pretty Russian girl like you end up in America, shooting a film about bullfighting?”

Ada sucked in her cheeks. “Two things, Carlos. I’m not Russian. And I’m not a girl. I’m a woman from the Ukraine who happens to be an actress.”

Strike two, Carlos thought. Ukraine or not, she sure sounded Russian when she got mad.

“Okay. My apologies.” He did his best face of contrition. “How does a pretty woman from the Ukraine end up in America shooting a film about bullfighting?”

“I became an actress,” Ada said, “in order to escape my country.”

So here she was, getting sanctimonious about the difference between Russian and the Ukraine, when she didn’t even like the place.

“My family sent me to Great Britain to study civil engineering, so that when the Soviets were gone I could help rebuild my country.” Ada wrapped her painted lips around the straw in her martini. Who used a straw in a martini? Carlos got the feeling she just liked to be contrary.

“But all the contracts ended up going to fat, greedy pigs—American firms who sucked up the money and left us with nothing.”

The Americans were good at that, Carlos thought, judging from their successes in doing so in Afghanistan and Iraq. At least that’s what he had read in the paper one morning over brunch at *El Zozo*.

“So, I became an actress.” She gave him a triumphant smile. “I wanted to come to America and take some stupid American girl’s job.”

At least she wasn't bitter. Carlos wondered what poor little American actress Ada had deprived of the privilege of working opposite a pro like him. He doubted she could have been as attractive, but perhaps she would've been easier to get into bed.

"But how did you end up here?" he said. "In Florida? Working in this movie?"

"I happen to know Yawg and Irg by personal association."

Personal association? What did that mean? Had she slept with them?

"What—"

"What about you, Carlos Estemadera? How does an aging Spanish television actor come to find himself at the center of an ambitious project like this?"

Aging television actor? Carlos' standing in her eyes was worse than he thought. "I don't know," he said, beginning to wish that he was starring opposite some dumb American broad.

"Well, I do."

"You do?" Carlos took a long drink from his *Cuba Libre*. He doubted he wanted her to tell him.

"Yawg wanted to keep his budget low, because he knew the smaller the budget, the more money the studio would spend on promotion," Ada said. "He didn't want to burden the project with the expectations or salary that would go along with hiring a big Latino star."

Carlos wondered how a Big Latino Star would have handled the camera incident that afternoon. Probably by quitting, which is what Carlos would have done if he too had piles of extra money laying around.

“But he also knew he wanted someone with a real Spanish vibe—someone he could lean the rest of the production on, because he knew he couldn’t afford a full cast of Spaniards—the Euro is just too strong.”

Carlos had never considered the Euro to be particularly strong. Since its adoption as the official Spanish currency, he’d mostly just considered it annoying.

“His solution was to hire you, and then fill in the gaps with actors from his production company.”

“His production company?” How did Ada know so much about all of this?

“You didn’t think Yawg got to be a director of his stature without developing a production company to support himself?”

“Suddenly everything began to click. “So that’s why they all look alike,” Carlos said, remembering his first confusing days on set.

“They do *not* all look alike.” Ada was glaring at him.

Shit. “Well, you know”—she kept glaring at him, and Carlos fumbled with how best to recover—“They’re all from the same place, is what I meant.”

“They most certainly are not.” Ada’s eyes bore holes through his forehead. “The men and women who work for the company are from a wide variety of countries in Southeast Asia. They just all happen to have emigrated to New York.”

Carlos was right. She did just like to be contrary. Well, two could play at that game.

“So he’s paying them American wages, then, right? If he’s so worried about saving money, why not just hire Mexicans? Or Cubans?” He poked the table with his index finger.

“We’re in Florida, after all.”

“Because he’s not paying them American wages,” said Ada. “He’s not paying them anything.”

Carlos was aghast.

“Yawg promised them if this film does well, they’ll have a spot in his next movie. And he’ll pay them double. He figures success on this will get him a foot in the door with MGM, and a bigger budget next time.”

Those poor saps. They’d never see a cent after this travesty was dropped on the public. Carlos wondered what his theater academy classmates would have said about the artistic integrity of this crowd.

“Well, at least I’m getting paid,” he said.

“This is what I’m trying to tell you, Carlos. I see you moping around the set, looking like you’re bored and so above everyone, when you should be grateful.”

She ran her finger around the rim of her glass.

“A lot of these people have families to support. If they hadn’t made such a sacrifice, you’d be making a tenth of what you signed that contract for.” She looked at him square in the eye. “If you were here at all.”

Qué fuerte. Ada certainly knew how to put on a guilt trip, Carlos thought. What did she have against him, anyway? It wasn’t his fault Yawg was a tight wad.

“What about you?” Carlos stirred his drink. “Do you feel grateful?”

“Not exactly.” Ada’s voice grew small.

“Why not?”

She let out a long sigh and poked at her empty glass with her straw. “I agreed to forgo a salary in exchange for a cut of the North American gross.”

So this was why she had been so antagonistic. She was bitter. Why women could not just come out and say these things, Carlos would never understand.

“And this is my fault, somehow?” he said. “It’s not like I told Yawg to pay no one else but me.”

“I know it’s not your fault, Carlos.” Ada poked some more with her straw. “And I don’t care about the money. I just wish you were a little more grateful.” She looked up at him. “This could be the movie that saves your career.”

Good God. She was crazy. They were all crazy. How else could Ada think there would be a gross for her to take a percentage of? How else could the members of Yawg’s production company think MGM would want to fund another of his movies? Carlos looked at Ada, and felt genuinely sorry for her. She may have been beautiful, but she was clueless.

“My career doesn’t need saving,” Carlos said. He hobbled to his feet and started limping towards the door.



After a couple days spent immobile and stewing in his trailer, Carlos decided it was time to have a chat with Yawg Nimeh. Just who did the guy think he was, insulting his lead actor’s intelligence by abandoning the script he’d read, disrespecting his lead actor’s abilities by making him shoot to the point of exhaustion, disregarding his lead actor’s personal safety by not testing potentially hazardous equipment, and—last but not least—positioning his lead actor as an object of distrust and jealousy by withholding pay from everyone else on set? It was ugly and manipulative, and unless things changed, Carlos was out, even if it meant forsaking his \$250,000.

At least, that's how it had all sounded when Carlos had practiced his long, muscular monologue in front of the makeup mirror in his trailer. Once he was actually seated opposite Nimeh, however, he found it difficult to know where to begin.

"Uh...." Carlos looked around the director's enormous trailer. It was at least twice the size of his own, complete with a sliding divider that cordoned off Nimeh's sleeping area from the larger, office-like room they were sitting in.

Yawg Nimeh himself occupied a cavernous leather captain's chair behind his broad mahogany desk, on which was arranged an array of stylish fountain pens. Carlos looked at his reflection in the cast iron-framed mirror mounted on the wall behind Nimeh's head. It was almost as though the guy had had his whole home office transported the one thousand miles from New York to San Rebat.

"Nice trailer," said Carlos.

"You like it?" said Yawg Nimeh. "I had my home office transferred here. I like to be comfortable when I work."

Interesting that despite what Ada had said about a tight budget, there was plenty of money for Yawg's decorative flourishes.

"What's on your mind, Carlos?" The director's eyes were terribly unsettling when he really set to looking at you, Carlos thought. They were magnified at least two times over by his glasses.

"It's just—" Carlos tried to recover the resolve that had led him there in the first place, but the scrutiny of the eyes was just too much. "I don't know what I'm doing here, Yawg."

"Good!" The director's tone was nothing short of jovial.

“Good? How can that be good?” said Carlos. “I’m your lead actor, and I’m telling you I am completely lost as to my purpose in this film.”

“Even better!” Yawg Nimeh clapped his hands and smiled. “Come now, Carlos. You remember what we’ve talked about. Uncertainty is good. Uncertainty leads to reaction, spontaneity, improvisation. No bullfighter enters the ring certain about what will happen once he’s in there.”

“But—”

“Listen, Carlos. You have to trust me. And you have to trust the editing process.”

Carlos felt like he was ten, listening to one of his father’s lectures.

“Remember what I told you? We’re taking chances. We’re the vanguard.” Nimeh punched his desk emphatically with each new sentence. “Film these days is stale, but we’re going to change all that.”

“If you say so,” Carlos said. It was odd, the power Yawg had to make you agree with him, even when you had come for the express purpose of telling him you did not.

“I know so,” said Yawg Nimeh. “How’s the leg?”

“Oh, it’s okay,” Carlos said. “Bruising’s almost gone now.”

“Perfect. I told you rest was the ticket.” Nimeh stood and walked briskly over to the trailer door. “We’re back to work tomorrow, so get that *traje* ready and let’s make history.”

“Loud and clear, Yawg.” Carlos got up and took another look around Yawg Nimeh’s trailer before walking back out into the Florida afternoon. The door slammed behind him.

“Loud and clear.”



Walking to the set the next morning, Carlos felt something was amiss.

He'd had his standard dosage of alcohol and painkillers already, and he remembered well how pleasant the smoke from his cigar had tasted, so he ruled out any substance withdrawal. He then gave his outfit the once over, and found everything in place: garish overcoat, garish cummerbund, garish socks, inane hat. After checking to see he'd remembered underwear, he gave his member a quick throttle to check for any corked up carnal urges. None at the present time.

It was a strange feeling he had, one of latitude and leeway, a sensation unfamiliar to him for some time. He wondered if this was what Ada had in mind when she had urged him to stop "moping around the set." *Is this what optimism feels like?* he wondered. This notion that, in spite of the difficulties in one's life, it was always possible to rise above and—dare he say it—look on the bright side?

He certainly had no good reason to feel this way. He was to start shooting again, now that he had mostly recovered from the runaway camera accident some five days before, but that was no cause for celebration. What was worse, he had completely chickened out of confronting Yawg Nimeh regarding the director's various transgressions, and could justifiably be branded a coward as a result. No, there was no sound rationale for Carlos' sanguine outlook.

All the same, he might as well enjoy it while he could. He looked around himself at the phony two-dimensional buildings that lined both sides of the phony street in this phony Andalusian town. It all wasn't so bad, he thought, and stretched his arms out to take in the rejuvenative rays of the sun. He flung his head back and breathed in as deeply as he could, just in time to see the building next to him lean and then come down to hit him square in the face.



“¡Esta producción es una mierda!” Carlos was pacing around his trailer with an ice pack tied around his head like one of the female extras’ peasant bonnets. Blood was caked to the side of his face. *“Pero, una mierda total. ¡Una mierda que huele peor que cualquier otra mierda!”*

“Carlos,” said Ada Vomissar, who was sitting on Carlos’ bed. “Please try to calm down.”

“¡Pero qué dices!” Carlos exploded again. “Calm down, *dice*. *Me dice a mí*: calm down. *¡Qué locura!*”

“Carlos. You’ve got to understand. These things happen all the time. You’re a professional, for God’s sake. Don’t tell me you’ve never seen a staging accident in all your time on screen.”

Carlos spun and stared at her, wide eyed. *“¡Pues sí! He visto ‘accidentes.’ ¡Pero casi llegaron a matarme! ¿No te das cuenta?”*

“I understand you’re upset, Carlos.” Ada spoke slowly and steadily. “But do you think you could speak in English? Or some other language I understand?”

Carlos looked up at the ceiling. He was angry enough to start throwing things, or punching holes in the walls, but he realized that such actions would only anger Ada Vomissar and damage his chances of sympathy sex. He sighed and plopped down in his chair.

“You’re right, Ada.” He reached into his breast pocket, pulled out one of his fine Rosados and ran it under his nose, enjoying the musty scent from end to end. “I’m a professional.” He gave Ada his smoothest grin. “I can take a few licks. “

There was a knock on the trailer door, and before either Carlos or Ada could muster any words, Irg Oterb was in the room with the ever-towering Doow Tsae.

“Carlos, babe! Great to see ya. Heard you got a little bump on the head there, champ. Looking beautiful as always. Don’t worry, we’ll fire everyone. Doow?”

“Yes, Irg.”

“Take a note: fire anyone who worked on those building facades. I want new hands on set before dinner time.”

“Sure thing, Irg.”

“And get this man a drink. You like brandy, Carlos?”

“Sure, I—”

“Get this man a brandy. Nothing goes better with a fine cigar.”

Carlos had already had multiple drinks to dull the steady throb in his head, but he supposed one more couldn’t hurt.

Irg Oterb turned to Doow Tsae, and spoke a little softer than the bullhorn volume he’d been using since he came in. “And while you’re at it, how about a brandy and cigar for me, too?” He turned back to his audience. “Need anything, Ada?”

“No, I think I’m okay, Irg.”

“Fantastic. Well, I can see you two are getting down to the nitty-gritty here, and if there’s one thing I hate, it’s the creative process.” He winked and burst into laughter. “So I’ll let you do your thing, you know, work that magic.” He and Doow Tsae made their exit.

The next thing Carlos knew, he and Ada were facing each other in silence. Before he could remember where they had left off, there was another knock on the door, and General Li stuck his head in.

“Your brandy, Mr. Estemadera?”

“Okay, kid. Bring it here.”

The kid tripped up the stairs, but kept the drink afloat. “Jesus, Mr. Estemadera! What happened to your head?”

”Here’s a tip for you, Li.” Carlos looked at Ada. “Always use a stunt man. Even when you’re not shooting.”

“I don’t understa—”

“Trust me, kid. Always use a stunt man. They’ll tell you you don’t need one, but you do. Always.”

General Li wrote something on his clipboard, then made a face and crossed it out, then wrote something else. “Is there anything else I can get for you, sir?”

“How about a new career?” said Carlos.

The kid looked at him like he was speaking in tongues. “I don’t—”

“Forget it, Li.” Carlos smiled at the boy. “Thanks for the brandy.”

The kid stumbled out of the trailer.

“I’m impressed with how you’re handling this,” said Ada Vomissar. She found Carlos, she had told him, crumpled beneath the fallen scenery on her way to the set, and recruited a couple of the larger male extras to carry him back to his trailer. “Besides that initial outburst, anyway.”

The truth was, Carlos was furious, and probably would have gone out to knock over every remaining building façade were it not for her presence in his trailer—something he had long since written off as a pipe dream. No way he was going to pass up this, his one shot at bringing his numerous fantasies to fruition.

“It’s like you said, Ada.” Carlos moved to sit next to her on the bed. “I should feel grateful for the opportunity.” *Joder*, he was good.

Ada sat up straighter, which only made her substantial bosom look bigger. “What opportunity?”

“You know, the opportunity, to—uh—experience new things. New sensations.”

“New sensations?” Ada arched one of those carefully sculpted eyebrows. “Carlos, are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fantastic,” he said. He set down his glass and leaned in to kiss her.

Ada leapt up, her eyes wide. “Carlos, what the hell are you doing?”

“Just trying to please you, baby.” He stood and ambled towards her.

“Oh, my God.” Ada pulled a tiny can from underneath her tunic. “This is mace, Carlos. Please don’t step any closer or I’ll have to use it.”

“Ooh, a little resistance,” Carlos said. “I don’t mind playing gam—”

There was a tiny *pfffft* sound, and all Carlos could see was pain. He screamed.

“I’m sorry, Carlos.” Ada’s voice sounded angry but remorseful. “I told you not to come closer.”

Carlos clawed at his eyes and screamed some more.

“You know, you don’t have to be aggressive to get a woman’s attention.”

Eyes. Flame. Scream.

“I know there’s a lot of pressure on you, as a Spanish man, to be full of *machismo*.”

Full of pain. Full of sting in eyes.

“You should think about talking to Carlos Romero about that. He’s really kind and thoughtful”—Can he make the eye hurt stop? Can he bring soft cool nice feeling to burning eye?—“and knows how to impress a woman without being pushy or threatening.”

Needles. Eyes. Scrape. Burn.

“I’m going now, Carlos. I’m sorry.”

Carlos collapsed to the floor and tried to cry out the agony.



Hours later, once he had soaked his swollen eyes in gallons of lush, glorious milk, Carlos stumbled into the lane toward the set. He had decided to take Ada’s advice and pay Carlos Romero a visit, though he had no intention of asking the bull wrangler for his thoughts about the limitations of *machismo*. He was going to kick some ass.

He knows how to impress a woman, Ada had said. The bastard. He knew all along Romero had been working behind the scenes to win the Russkie’s heart.

He made his way past the dark, wooden facades of the set buildings, feeling almost as though he was walking through a ghost town. Except that this place lacked even that small whiff of humanity one would find in an abandoned locale: instead, emptiness hung in the air, a strange aura of detachment and indifference. Carlos could feel the air grasping him tightly by the throat, and he was seized by visions of buildings crowding around to fall on him, one by one by one.

He stopped and put his head between his knees, and the feeling quickly passed. Mace could do horrible things to a man.

Carlos approached the bullring, and though its dark heft was forboding, he reminded himself that it was just a set, not a haunted house, and that he was here for a reason: to find Carlos Romero, and to fire the opening salvo in what he imagined to be a battle for the love of Ada Vomissar.

He walked through one of the arches toward the center of the ring. He had no idea where Romero's trailer was, but supposed it couldn't be far from the ring since the bullpens were located just behind the structure.

He looked to his right, hoping for a clue as to where he should be headed. Finding none, he turned left, and found himself staring at a hulking black mass crouched next to one of the bullring's walls. He was suddenly gripped by a powerful, all too visceral fear: he was standing, completely unarmed, just twenty yards from a bull.

Esto no puede ser, thought Carlos. Had the bull seen him? Was the mace still playing tricks on his mind?

Esto no está pasando.

Suddenly, that last bullfight from his youth was right in front of his eyes: how, after being stabbed for the first time with one of those long spears, the beast was powerfully overcome—by what? Rage? Fear? Adrenaline?—and then it was in the stands, the audience in chaos, people being crushed in the human stampede.

Esto es una pesadilla.

Carlos tried to think about what he should do, but his mind was instantly drawn back to that horrific moment. He could see the enormous crest of muscle on the bull's back, could feel

the blast of hot, sticky air, could smell the thick, musty scent of the animal's perspiration. He saw again the charge of people, and the boy, no older than himself at the time, who had slipped, then stood up, then went limp as one of the massive horns lifted him off the ground, its white tip protruding from his stomach. His face went slack like a rope and his eyes lurched around in their sockets and then he was tossed at the feet of his mother who screamed at him as he bled to death.

Carlos' brain took evasive action, shutting off all higher function, and the world seemed to slow down. He felt himself running, running hard, his drugged legs spilling out in front of him across the sand of the bullring. There was a low, deep thunder that seemed to swirl all around him, and he knew the bull was in pursuit.

He neared the wall, and he felt his entire body tense. Without willing them to do so, his legs propelled him into the air. His body twisted itself around, a kind of aerial pirouette, and his arms lengthened above his head. His fingers extended and hooked themselves around the top of the plaster. He felt the strain in his forearms and shoulders as he struggled to pull himself up, and the tendons in his wrists burned as he fought to keep his fingers from slipping. He had the sense that every muscle in his body, every synapse firing in his brain, was devoted to this singular mission of propelling him upward and over the wall, safe from the horns of the black beast charging behind him. He groaned, and felt himself gliding upward, his calves tense against the wall and his stomach hardening into a smooth stone.

And then he stopped.

There was a kind of *whoosh* as the pace of the world came back to him, and with it his non-instinctual perceptions, and he was suddenly aware of his own impotence, aware of the steady clapping of the bull and its approaching hooves, and aware of his own body, limp against the wall, his legs pointlessly kicking from side to side.

There was a grim silence broken only by the rhythmic clop of the bull's hooves. *Clop. Clop. Clop.* Carlos shut his eyes against the blow sure to come.

“¿Pero, qué coño haces?”

Carlos was surprised to hear a voice speaking in Spanish, and all the more so for the voice using an invective like *coño*. He heard a snort, and opened his tightly clenched eyes to see the bull sniffing at his hindquarters and Carlos Romero standing next to it, squinting up at him.

“Pues...” Carlos scoured the back regions of his brain for a response that might salvage his manhood.

“¿No me has oído?” Romero was still looking at him. *“¿Por qué estás allí, colgado del muro como un mono?”*

It was a good question, Carlos thought. Why am I here, hanging from the wall like a monkey? He didn't have a ready answer.

“Es que—” he began.

“Es que el toro te da miedo, ¿verdad?” Romero smiled and winked at him. *“Tienes miedo del toro. ¿No es eso?”*

The bull had gone from sniffing Carlos' hindquarters to chewing on the back of his pants. Perhaps he could explain to the bull wrangler that it was not this specific bull that had frightened him, but only the specter of bulls in general.

“No, no es eso, exactamente.” Carlos lifted himself up the wall a couple of inches. *“Estoy haciendo mis ejercicios.”*

“Ah. Ya veo,” said Romero, making no attempt at all to conceal his broad grin, nor his high-pitched giggle. *“Qué ejercicios más interesantes.”*

Carlos struggled for a moment, hoping to pull himself up to an impressive height, and then gave up. “*Estoy cansado.*”

“*Claro.*” The man’s voice quivered. “*¡Cansado de toros!*” He collapsed on himself laughing.

Carlos could not sustain his grasp any longer, and fell awkwardly to the ground. The bull snorted, which made Carlos flinch, which in turn provoked a fresh round of guffaws in the animal’s companion. Carlos hurriedly stood up, his back pressed against the wall and his arms at his sides, while the bull sniffed at his crotch.

Amidst his giggling, Romero reached out his right hand to Carlos. “*Bienvenido, Carlos.*”

Carlos remembered the purpose for his late night visit, but realized, in light of the circumstances, it would be terribly bad form to challenge his counterpart to a love duel.

“*Buenas noches.*” Carlos reached forward to shake Romero’s hand.

“*Y este,*” Romero said, gesturing to the massive, docile creature next to him. “*Este es mi toro, Bitsy.*”

Bitsy. How perfect, thought Carlos. Mortally humiliated by a bull named Bitsy. He pulled out his flask and offered Carlos Romero a shot of whiskey.



Carlos discovered, in the process of getting drunk with the man, that he quite liked Romero the bull wrangler. It turned out he was from Madrid, which wasn’t a big surprise—*madrileños* were always a bit haughty on first impression—but all in all he was a solid Spaniard, albeit a Spaniard of a different stripe. Where Carlos liked whiskey, Romero liked wine, where

Carlos liked Dalí, Romero liked Velázquez, but they both liked their *jamón* plentiful and dark, which was enough. Pork, Carlos had always found, was the common bond of every Spaniard.

Romero had even taken it well when Carlos confessed the original motivation for his quest that evening. Ada was, objectively, a woman worth fighting for, and Romero admitted that after a few late-night chats, he'd considered pursuing her. The truth was, however, that his loyalties belonged to a woman back in Madrid, a fellow bull trainer who had stolen his heart away with her firm command of the muscular animals. Besides, Romero had added, even if he had chosen to pursue the Ukrainian bombshell, it would have been a fruitless quest—Ada was married, so what was the use pining for her?

The words coming out of Romero's mouth hit Carlos with the force of the high-speed train between Madrid and Sevilla.

“¿Dices que está casada?”

“Desde luego. Hombre”—Carlos watched in shock as Romero pointed to his ring finger—*“Lleva un anillo.”*

Carlos had never noticed a ring. She must have taken it off while shooting.

Romero, it seemed, had done his homework. By chatting up the extras who were so dazzled by his handling of Bitsy the bull, he had learned that Ada's husband was part of the community of Southeast Asian expatriates in New York City, and was good friends with Yawg Nimeh. As it happened, Mr. Ada Vomissar had designed most of the sets for the film, but had stayed in New York to do work on a couple Broadway productions.

Everything snapped into place for Carlos. He remembered Ada saying something about her work in the film being the result of a “personal connection,” and how aggressive she had gotten about his lack of appreciation for the sacrifices of the film's workers. No wonder: her

husband was her connection, and he was another one of the schmucks working free for Yawg Nimeh.

The house falling on Carlos began to make more sense. It was not that the stage crew was inept, or that the set was poorly designed, as he had previously thought. No, the set had been designed, by Ada's husband, to do exactly what it was supposed to do: cause enough freak accidents to scatter Carlos' perceptions, interrupt his rhythm, give him paranoia and provoke exactly what Yawg wanted—a "reactive" performance.

Ada herself, the *puta*, had been leading him on the entire time, probably at Nimeh's bidding, just to make him more confused, to keep his mind off of acting and to ruin his focus. Then, to really rattle his brain, she maced him.

They were all part of the same team: Yawg, Ada, her husband. And the worst part was that it had worked. Here he was, Carlos realized, drunk and shaken, the whole of his intelligence channeled into ascertaining the extent of romantic entanglement between his co-star and a bull wrangler. They had manipulated him into becoming a reactionary, emotional wreck, and he had blindly let them do it.

And so Carlos reacted in the only way he knew how, by drinking himself into oblivion. He only had a couple days left, and if he had to keep shooting the damn thing, he might as well be sauced.

He marveled that he had once imagined acting to be an exciting, stimulating profession, with new challenges to be met each day. That was Hollywood stuff, straight from a movie. It was every bit as exhausting and stultifying as any other job. He was surprised he'd let himself be fooled into believing his work on this film would be any different. It was a naivete he promised himself he'd not permit again.



After filming had finally, mercifully wrapped, Carlos, Ada, Irg Oterb, Doow Tsae, and of course Yawg Nimeh flew to Hollywood for the film's initial screening at MGM Studios. On hand would be a small contingent of studio executives, Carlos had been told, including Alex J. Venta, the president of marketing. There would also be a test audience on hand—though it would consist of a sample of people from Los Angeles, which to Carlos meant their opinions would be highly suspect to begin with.

He had been to Hollywood once before, in his early, heady days as an actor some twenty years prior. His Spanish agent had assured him that American studios were desperately seeking strong Latin men to star as the seductive, dangerous playboy opposite the straight-shooting American. While Carlos would be cast as a villain, his agent told him, what was ultimately important was that he'd be getting a foot in the door—and besides, people made careers of getting shot by people like Clint Eastwood, just ask Lee Van Cleef. At the time, Carlos had believed him, had even relished the opportunity to play the torrid Latin menace to tepid American sexuality.

But as it had turned out, Hollywood had been looking for Latin men slightly less swarthy than Carlos—his large frame and strong gaze were too intimidating for American audiences, and difficult to accept as someone who would be vanquished by whatever scrawny Humphrey Bogart look-alike would play opposite him.

Or at least that's what his agent had told him the studio had said. Carlos was in no real position at the time to doubt it—he had no real contact with the people allegedly making those

decisions—but then it was also true that the only marketing material his agent had mustered to promote Carlos were reel-to-reel audio recordings of some of his theater work and a few head shots. The studio Carlos had worked with on the *Espíritu del Gitano* series had refused to surrender any tapes of his movies, since they were afraid of losing yet another talented youngster to the Anglos.

Carlos realized now, seeing the skyline of Los Angeles again and the imperial “HOLLYWOOD” lettering on Mount Cahuenga, that he had never had the slightest chance of being chosen—at the time, he had neither the resume nor the name recognition to be taken seriously at all. He assumed that the purpose of the visit had actually been for his agent to do some networking of his own, financed in part by Carlos’ agent fees. This seemed even more likely in light of his agent having been suddenly hired away by one of the larger American studios about six months after their visit.

“This is it, Carlos,” his agent had said, “Now I’ll have no problem getting you work *al otro lado*.” A week after that, his agent stopped returning Carlos’ calls; a month after that, Carlos had lost all word of him entirely.

Hijo de puta, Carlos thought. He looked around the SUV carting him and Ada to the studio offices for a bottle. He needed something to smooth himself over; he’d let the memories cut in to him too sharply. He kicked himself for not having the forethought to have brought a flask.

“Are you all right, Carlos?” Ada put her hand on his shoulder.

He looked at her. “Fine.”

She let out a faint sigh and turned back to look out her own window. He wondered how she knew he was angry. Had he a vein popping out of his forehead, or were her womanly senses

simply that in tune with her surroundings? He let his eyes trace her curvaceous frame, enjoyed the curve of her firm breasts underneath her ribbed white sweater. He was aware of the heaviness in his pants, and hated it, almost as much as he hated her and her unattainable beauty.

It wasn't long before they arrived at what Carlos assumed was the place. The building was tall, gray and impersonal, like so many other of the buildings he had seen in this gray and impersonal country. American architects seemed to believe that if you made one gray, impersonal monolith a slightly different shape or a slightly different size, that small modification would somehow make up for the unimaginativeness in the rest of the design.

But then, there was something to be appreciated about rows and rows of these enormous edifices pushing their way into the sky. The grand structures were majestic in their steadfastness. In a way, they conjured the strength and impunity of the pillars in a bullring. *There is no escape*, they said to him, as he imagined the cold stone walls of a bullring might convey to the bulls. *We control your very destiny*. Something about that strength Carlos could only admire.

Carlos watched Nameer, Irg's driver, help the producer, his assistant, and filthy pig of a director from the other creme-colored SUV, and then was aware that Ada had already stepped down to the sidewalk and was staring in at him.

"Are you coming?"

Dios, what nice breasts she had. Carlos made sure the pressure between his legs had resided, and then stepped out to join her.



The studio guys were a bunch of pricks. They weren't raw, transparent pricks like Yawg Nimeh, or suave, glad-handing pricks like Irg Oterb. They were a different species of prick, one Carlos hadn't yet encountered on this jaunt across the U.S.—they were rich, steady, bottom-line pricks, pricks with market savvy, pricks who believed themselves the financial gatekeepers of the world's creative impulses. Carlos wondered how many films they had canned after months of work—how many film canisters lay away somewhere, locked in reject limbo, projects that had once breathed with the life of all who labored on them, but then sputtered and died or ran out of monetary gas or simply sucked and got shelved. He wondered whether this film, *Handful of Pesetas*, would join the undistinguished ranks of those others, forgotten and never to be released to the general public.

In some perverse sense, he hoped it would be, just to spite Yawg Nimeh and his complex of self-adulation. It was silly to wish defeat on himself; after all, a successful theater run with this film could lead to the American hey-day Carlos had long since convinced himself he would never have. But given that he would be paid his \$250,000 no matter what, he really didn't give a shit.

Me cago en esto, he thought, glad that he had nothing on the line in the way things with this disastrous production turned out. But, oh, to see Yawg's face when they told him it was the *mierda* that everyone knew it to be.

They all sat behind a stainless steel, horseshoe shaped table: Carlos, with Ada to his left, Nimeh to his right, and then, next to Nimeh, Alex J. Venta, the company's marketing president, with a team of assistants, or perhaps mutant henchmen, to his right. The company men all had notepads set in front of them, and each was holding one of those expensive executive pens.

“Well, gentlemen,” said the marketing president. “And lady—excuse me, Ms. Vomissar.”

Ada Vomissar gave him an icy smile.

“Anyway,” he said. “Here we are. Let me begin by congratulating you all on your hard work. Especially you, Yawg.” The other company men clapped enthusiastically.

Especially you, Yawg?

“Now, the studio wants to stress that you all shouldn’t be feeling any pressure about this.” He pushed his turtle shell glasses up his nose. “The studio appreciates how ‘in-the-loop’ you’ve kept us throughout the filming, and how responsive you’ve been to our concerns.”

Carlos looked over at Irg Oterb, who was smiling broadly as usual.

“We just want to make sure you all know you can count on our support for the release of the film. This test screening is just for any small edits the film might need to enhance watchability. And the test audience”—Alex J. Venta gestured to the translucent wall to the right of where they were sitting, and light suddenly filled the space on the other side, illuminating a full-sized theater filled with people— “The test audience is just to help us decide how best to market this thing.”

Carlos looked at Ada. She shrugged.

“The truth is, we think this has pretty enormous potential. Look at our research.” With that, Venta flipped on a Power Point presentation on the screen in front of them, with numerous tables devoted to profit margins from the studio’s more recent “independent spotlight” productions.

“The great thing about a film like this—which of course you already know, Yawg—is that the budget is much lower than something filmed on location here in Hollywood, or in Spain.

That means the studio can actually post a bigger profit off something small-scale because we're not putting down so much up front for production costs."

Carlos was beginning to feel dizzy from all the financial speak. Hadn't Yawg insisted that the production was all about taking chances? About making a statement in a time of artistic sterility? This didn't sound like that at all. The more Carlos listened, the more it sounded like a calculated money grab.



"Carlos, wait!"

Carlos saw Ada push her way out of the revolving metal doors of the studio offices and turn to follow him down the street. He quickened his pace.

"Carlos!" She was yelling, which was earning him all kinds of unwanted attention from other people on the street. He could feel their eyes following him, accusing him of the simple crime of trying to escape a beautiful actress on the streets of Hollywood.

"Carlos, please."

He stopped, not because he wanted to, but because he knew there was no way he would be able to outpace her without looking like an uncoordinated idiot, or collapsing in exhaustion from the effort, or both.

"What?" he said.

"What do you mean, *what?*" Her voice was crisp, her accent thicker than usual. "You just stormed out of your own film's screening. Before the credits even finished."

It was true, he had. Carlos had found the previous two hours bewildering—the film was absent any hint of a coherent plot, protagonist, antagonist, or exploration of the characters’ motivations. Though what it lacked in more traditional elements, Carlos supposed, it had more than made up for with rapid-fire jump cutting, violent imagery, and an irritating, flamenco-derived soundtrack.

“I left,” Carlos said, “Because I was alone in a room full of lying, ruinous hyenas.”

What the film had also had was a female bullfighter, apparently played by Ada and apparently shot while he was offset. The odd thing was that, really, the movie seemed to be more about her than him.

“Oh, cut it with that emotive actor crap,” said Ada. “Isn’t it enough that you’re an actor in your career? Try having conversation with me like a normal person, without that defensive persona you always adopt.”

“Look,” he said, “all I know is, when I signed on to this film I was given what Yawg told me was a ‘tentative draft’ of the script. Then I get to filming, and it turns out none of the goddamn scenes are scripted. Then we watch the film, and it turns out he’s edited it into a completely different story.”

“So? He’s the director.”

By the end, Ada’s character had become so adept at bullfighting that she and Carlos’ character were booked to participate in the same *corrida*—something the movie suggested, by showing shots of the opening parade, but ultimately denied its audience. Carlos supposed that was the postmodern approach, to dangle something in front of viewers’ noses and then, at the moment of greatest anticipation, yank it away. Postmodern approach or not, Carlos hated it—he hated the way it made him feel when the screen went black just shy of that climactic moment.

“Yawg has to follow his creative impulse,” said Ada Vomissar. “That’s his job. You’re an actor, Carlos. Your job is to do what you’re told and hope for the best. That’s my job, too. That’s all we have.”

Intellectually, what she was saying made total sense. He had done many films where he was made to seem a villain, and had enjoyed them all. But this was different. His character wasn’t a villain, or a hero. He was neither good nor bad. He was lost. The wild look in his eyes in so many scenes, Carlos recognized. But he recognized it from the wild feeling he had in his heart every day. The feeling of a lack of control, of indecision, of anxiety, of never knowing whether he was on the right path. And now that feeling was about to be sold to the world, and there was nothing Carlos could do about it.

Ada was right. He was an actor. And it made him feel naked and ashamed and vulnerable.

“I was lied to.” Carlos grabbed Ada’s hand and pushed it off his shoulder. Ada grabbed both of his hands and focused her eyes into his. Carlos felt immobile.

“I didn’t lie to you, Carlos. And you don’t know Yawg did either. Maybe he just changed his mind.”

“Yeah.” Carlos grunted. “Maybe.” He wished now that he had forgone acting all together and moved on to directing, so that he too could simply make things up as he went, could manipulate characters and their emotions, could suddenly flip one’s fortunes with the stroke of a pen or close of a camera shutter.

“If there’s one thing every actor has to learn, “ Ada said, “it’s to not take editing decisions personally. I would’ve thought you, Carlos, of all people, would have learned that years ago.”

Carlos said nothing. He thought it was easier not to take such things personally when the result was not so unnervingly suggestive of one's own frailties. He looked at Ada's lips, so full and so dark around her smooth white teeth, and thought of all the times he had wanted to touch them onscreen and off. He wanted only to pinch them, to see if they would pop and her body would deflate before him. It was absurd, he thought, that anyone should be allowed to be so beautiful.

He looked back into her eyes, wide and green.

"*Nos vemos*," he said, and kissed her on both cheeks. He turned and walked away, imagining her watching his back as he went. When he turned around, he saw her walking briskly back the other way.



At the next screening of the film, at the Vancouver Film Festival, Carlos wasn't there. Nor was he at the screening in Toronto. He didn't go to the Sundance Film Festival, where the film won best motion picture, and he certainly didn't go to any of the smaller festivals in Detroit, or Pittsburgh, or any other post-industrial American wasteland. No, one viewing of *Handful of Pesetas* was more than enough for Carlos, and he had turned down the studio's offer to fly him all those places with Yawg, Ada and Irg.

Instead, he had gone home to Málaga, to be in a city he understood. True, he no longer had a sweaty young assistant to bring him food and drink, or the newspaper, or aspirin whenever he so desired, but he had his own bed, which remained, as far as Carlos was concerned, the most comfortable bed in the world. And he had his own apartment, in which he could stroll around

naked and could leave as messy as he liked, and he had a number of excellent cafes nearby to patronize. Real cafes, the kind with legs of meat hanging from hooks in the ceiling, the kind that had a wide selection of good cheeses and wines, the kind where one could sit at the bar and throw one's dirty napkins to the floor. Not one of those sanitized American cafes where all they sold was cups of *mierda* they pretended was coffee and little healthy sandwiches with cups of yogurt on the side.

Back in Málaga, Carlos didn't have to worry about trying to look presentable for anyone, didn't have to go to the restroom periodically to check for food in his moustache or embarrassing *mocos* hanging out of his nose, could let his hair go uncombed and leave his shirt untucked, didn't have to obsess over how he must look in the eyes of some woman.

No one in Málaga knew anything about Carlos' jaunt overseas, or would have cared had he told them. No one wanted to know that his latest film had received four star ratings from all the top critics, or that his performance was being hailed as “iconic” and “representative of a generation.” No one was interested in the massive commercial success the film had become, no one wanted to hear about how it had thumped movies with twice the advertising budget at the box office. No one had any idea who he was, and no one had any expectation about who he should be.

And this was exactly why, when the studio had concluded its tour of North American film festivals and was ready to unleash its European media blitz—beginning with a highly publicized premiere at the San Sebastian Film Festival—and they called Carlos and asked him to fly up for it, he said no.

“What do you mean, no?” said Doow Tsae.

“What do you mean, no?” said Irg Oterb.

“What do you mean, no?” said Yawg Nimeh.

“Carlos, you can’t possibly say no,” said Ada Vomissar.

How interesting, now that the tables were turned, Carlos thought. He remembered the mace well, and had never dreamed he would have the retaliatory joy of being able to say no to Ada about anything.

“And why,” he said, bemused, “should I not be able to say no?”

There was an exasperated noise on the other end, and then, “Because this is how it works, Carlos! Actors star in movies, the studio releases them, and then the actors help promote them. The more people that see the movie, the better things are for the actor’s career.”

Not when the movie is an unredeemable *trozo de mierda*, thought Carlos. And not when critics were describing his role as “a masterful self-parody of Spanish excess... a bloated and confused foil to Ada Vomissar’s svelte, commanding heroine.” Certainly for her career, it was helpful for more people to see the movie. He was not so sure it was a good thing for his career, much less for him personally.

“Not doing it,” Carlos said, and after trying to convince him for several more minutes, Ada hung up.



Three months later, Carlos woke up to the phone screaming at him from the nightstand. He smacked his lips and blinked at the ceiling until the spackling he’d recently done came into focus. His head felt much like it had every morning these past few months—cloudy, confused, and full of alcohol.

Este teléfono es aún peor que el de antes, he thought. He had purchased a cell phone about a month ago, and Carlos had been unable to figure out how to alter the obnoxious noise it made when he received a call. Since he rarely took the phone out with him, or left it turned off, and even when he had it on and with him he rarely chose to answer it, he hadn't felt much urgency to do so. But now, with the familiar refrain of *Carmen* drilling into his head, he rued that decision.

"*¡Que te calles!*" he said to the phone, before flipping it open and then slamming it shut again to end the call. He snorted and rolled over in bed, hoping to salvage the most excellent dream he'd been having, involving a line of chorus girls marching out of a penis-shaped birthday cake.

But before he'd had his eyes closed for five seconds, there was the glorious march of *Carmen* again, managing to seem even louder than the first time. His eyes popped open, and after glaring at the wall for a moment, Carlos flipped over, grabbed the phone and hurled it across the room, where it had a disappointingly soft landing amidst the pile of dirty clothes metastasizing out of his closet.

He looked at the nightstand and saw a bottle of La Negrita rum next to a bottle of Coca-Cola, and in between the two a single shot glass that read "I Love LA." He had apparently been indulging in one of his favorite solitary drinking games the night before: taking a shot of La Negrita followed by a shot of Coke, then swishing the two around before swallowing. Though he wasn't quite sure it qualified as a game; after all, weren't games usually between more than one person, with a clearly defined winner and loser? Perhaps it was more of a personal challenge.

Whatever it was, he was getting quite good at it. He had purchased the bottle of rum, which was now three-quarters empty, the prior afternoon. He leaned back against his pillow and let his eyes close, picturing the long smooth legs of the chorus girls covered in icing.

And then the phone started up again. Carlos was now very near to all-out rage, and he uncapped the rum and took a healthy swig to steady himself. He stumbled to his feet, and then, spying the phone resting on one of his new pairs of Dolce and Gabbana briefs, leapt for it. He belly-flopped into the clothes pile and put the phone in a kind of chokehold, and then realized the far more effective thing would be to just throw it out the window. He rose to his knees, squinted at the open window and cocked his arm.

¡Espérate! His brain screamed at him. He frowned. *Mira al teléfono.* He looked down at the phone. *Y ahora, lee bien.* He slowly read the letters: A, D, A.

¡Coño! It was her! *Gracias a Dios,* his brain muttered, exhausted.

Carlos steadied the phone and carefully opened it with trembling hands.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Carlos.” Ada Vomissar’s voice was as deep and husky as Carlos had remembered, maybe even more so. “I’m so glad you finally picked up.”

“Me, too,” said Carlos. “It’s good to—”

“Carlos, I wish there was time to catch up right now, but I have a photo shoot for one of the weeklies up here in an hour.”

“Right,” said Carlos. “Of course.”

There were voices in the background and then Ada’s voice said, “But I’m sure you’re plenty busy yourself, now that the film’s been released over there. You must be up to your ears in Spanish press.”

Carlos thought about all the numbers he didn't recognize on his phone. He knew his voice mail was full, because his phone would tell him that every time he turned it on, but he hadn't the slightest idea how to check it—nor did he have the interest.

"Oh, sure," he said.

"But listen, we'll have plenty of time to catch up on set, don't you think?" A hint of something that Carlos thought might be excitement had crept into the voice.

"What?" Carlos had no idea what she was talking about. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Carlos." There was a heavy sigh, and then her tinkling laughter. "Stop it."

Carlos frowned and looked at the phone. "Stop it?" He felt as lost in this conversation with Ada as ever.

Another heavier sigh. "Look, Carlos, I know you weren't as happy with the edit as you could have been."

Damned right, he wasn't.

"And I know you have your differences with Yawg."

Joder, the woman was on fire.

"But you could at least answer his calls, don't you think?"

Carlos blinked. "Answer his calls?"

"He's been trying to get a hold of you for two weeks."

Carlos blinked again. "Why?"

"The studio wants him—wants us, I should say—to make another movie."

Carlos marched to his nightstand and filled his mouth with rum.

"Carlos?" said Ada's voice. "Are you there?"

Carlos shook his head against the liquor. “Yeah,” he managed. “Still here.”

“Is this really the first you’ve heard of this?”

Carlos thought about trying to explain to her his total ignorance of cell phones, or his avoidance of the endless intrusions into his life this newfound fame had brought him, or the fact that most nights he just went out to the same bar where the staff knew to keep people from bothering him, but he realized she would be immediately scornful of any of those possible explanations. And after waiting so long to hear that voice, the last thing he wanted it to be doing was to be giving one of those awful lectures. “It’s just that I’ve been so busy.”

“I figured as much.” The voice sounded relieved. “Yawg was convinced you were screening his calls or avoiding him or something, but I told him, ‘Yawg, he’s got a lot on his plate. Once he gets a spare second, I’m sure he’ll call you back.’ ”

“Yeah,” said Carlos, now fully on auto-pilot. “I was actually going to call him today, after I do this interview for, uh—”

“You don’t need to explain it to me, Carlos.” Ada’s voice tinkled some more. “Believe me, I know just what you’re talking about.”

It was amazing how well people understood you when you told them what they wanted to hear.

“So you’re in, then, right?”

Carlos had no idea what to say. “Well,” he said, hoping if he spoke slowly his mind would come up with something, “I’m not sure.” *I’m not sure. Brilliant.* His brain growled at him.

Ada’s voice was suddenly in the clutches of riotous laughter. “OK,” it said between outbursts. “Now I know you’re joking.”

I am? thought Carlos. “I just want to weigh my options,” said Carlos. *Mucho mejor*, said his brain.

“Oh, well. Okay, then.” For a moment, Carlos was fearful Ada was being strangled, she was laughing so hard. “Carlos, you are a riot.”

“Heh,” said Carlos. “Heh, heh.”

“Be sure you say the same thing to Yawg,” Ada’s voice said, still in hysterics. “I really do have to go, but use the same trick on Yawg, he’ll love it. Weigh your options...” She trailed off into more laughter. “As if there would be anything to weigh against a four million dollar payday.”

Carlos nearly fell off the bed.

“Okay, *besos*, Carlos,” said Ada’s voice. “I’ll see you in a few months. Keep up the humor, it suits you.”

“Wait—” said Carlos. “What four million dollar payday?” But the call had ended and he was left staring at the screen of his phone. *Last Call: 5 min 24 secs*. It was hard to believe his world had been flipped on its head in the time it took him to move his bowels.

He stood up. It was time to take the bull by the horns. He flipped open the phone and did the one thing he knew to do: he called his mother.

“¿Diga?” said his mother’s sweet voice.

“Hola, Mamá.” Said Carlos.

“¡Ay, hijo mío!” His mother’s voice grew high-pitched with excitement, which always irritated Carlos, which then made him feel guilty for feeling irritated, which irritated him even more. “¿Qué cuentas, hijito?”

After convincing his mother that very little of interest had been going on with him—a hard sell, as his mother believed he was now the most respected actor *en toda España*—and that while he’d love to come tomorrow for brunch, his schedule was unfortunately quite full—“*¡Qué lástima, hijo, que estés tan ocupado!*”—and that no, there was no special *chica* yet in his life for her to meet, Carlos was finally able to ask whether she recalled any phone calls from a man named Yawg Nimeh.

“*¿Quién dices?*” his mother’s voice said.

“Yawg Nimeh.” Carlos said the name again slowly, in the hopes of not having to say it again.

“*A ver, a ver.*” Carlos imagined his poor mother’s voice going deep into the obscure recesses of her aging mind in search of the bizarre name. “*Es que no me acuerdo, hijo. Yawg Nimeh...*”

Carlos listened as she began her recitation of every soul that had chanced to call over the last two weeks, from her sister (his *tía* Carmina) to the building manager to the men who delivered the new washer Carlos had bought for her to the man who had called saying he’d been unable to reach her son but that he wanted to pay him four million American dollars to be in another one of his movies.

“*Mamá.*” Carlos grabbed his forehead. Did she even realize what she was saying?

“*Mamá, ¿te das cuenta de lo que has dicho?*”

“*Sí, hijito mío,*” she chirped. “*Y yo le dije que tú lo mereces.*” She went on to ask if Carlos had already talked to this man, and if Carlos was going to be in the film or not, and though she thought it was a wonderful opportunity, she also considered Carlos to be a grown man capable of making his own decisions, and she knew many of her friends were already very

excited about the possibility of his character continuing his uniquely Spanish adventures—though this time with, of course, an improved supporting cast and even better production value, as the man who called had promised—and why was he being so *callado*?

“*Besos, Mamá,*” said Carlos, and he gently closed the phone on her still fluttering voice.

He got up from the bed and walked quietly to the bathroom. He pressed his hands against either side of the sink to steady himself and stared at himself in the mirror. *Four million dollars.* Carlos kept staring. *They want to pay you four million dollars.* He stared at the lines under his eyes, the cracking in his lips, the bulges just above his hips. He stared at the hair sprouting from his ears, the hints of gray sneaking into his mustache, and the sag of the skin in his chest.

Four million dollars.

He thought about the time he spent filming *Handful of Pesetas*. He thought about the torture of seeing a woman like Ada everyday without being able to touch her. He thought about the incompetence of everyone involved. He thought about Irg’s smarminess and Doow Tsae’s obnoxious giggling. He thought of Yawg—*Dios*, what an *hijo de puta*. He thought about the studio executives and their contempt for everything that didn’t involve dollar signs. He thought about the idiot audiences who had actually liked the *mierda* that the film had turned out to be , and the idiot praise people gave to all the idiot performances, especially his own.

Four million dollars.

He thought about walking down the street and having to wear a hat and keep his head low so people wouldn’t recognize him. He thought about the odd notes he had received from middle aged Spanish women, inviting him to dinner, or to sip champagne, or to weekend with them at their beach cottages in that nice little matador outfit he wore in the film. He thought about not having any privacy when he went anywhere, not even to buy pornographic magazines at the

newsstand, and he thought that if things were this bad now, he couldn't imagine what they would be like after a heavily marketed sequel.

Four million dollars.

He looked down at the new bathroom sink he had had installed, with the marbled inlay and ergonomic handles. He opened the mirror and looked at the array of pleasing pastel bottles of shaving cream and shampoo and facial scrub he'd been getting used to. He went to his closet and looked at the pinstripes on the Armani suit he'd purchased after the film was set for European release. He looked at the Prada dress shoes that complimented the suit so well and cradled his feet like he was walking on pillows. He went to the living room and looked at the big flat screen television he'd bought only a week ago, turned it on and marveled at the the brightness of the colors and clarity of the picture.

His stomach grumbled, and Carlos thought of the delicious breakfast he would have at the expensive café down the street from his apartment: *tortilla española*, a variety of cured meats and cheeses, fine bread and gourmet coffee; he thought of how he would be greeted by name by the maître d' and be ushered to his favorite table in the corner, and how if by chance he'd forgotten his wallet, as had happened on more than one occasion, the maître d' would simply chuckle and tell him it would be no problem, that the café would happily await his next visit for the bill to be settled.

Four million dollars.

Carlos walked back towards his room, and as he did he began to hear the strains of *Carmen* from somewhere near the foot of his bed. He picked up his phone, and though the screen showed simply an unrecognizable string of numbers, Carlos had a good idea of whom it might be.

“Hello?” he said.

“Carlos! *Mi amigo!*” Irg Oterb’s voice burst out of the phone at him.

“Hey, Irg,” Carlos said.

“Listen, sorry to bother you.” The voice sounded genuinely apologetic. “I know things have got to be crazy for you right now.”

“Yeah, they sure are,” said Carlos. “But it’s no big deal.”

“That’s my Carlos!” sputtered the voice. “Always a champ. *El campeón*, they should call you.”

“Yeah,” said Carlos, “they should.”

“Well, sir, I know your time is valuable, so I’ll get right down to it. We got a call from Alex Venta at MGM the other day, and well—”

“Irg?” said Carlos. “I talked to Ada.”

“Oh.” The voice sounded tense. “You did?”

“I did. You can tell Yawg I’m not screening his calls.”

The voice on the other end exhaled deeply. “That is a relief, my friend.” Carlos could hear Oterb whisper to someone in the background.

“So Carlos, buddy—what do you say?”

“What do I say?” Carlos took a deep breath and uncapped the bottle of Negrita. It was amazing, he thought, what a man would do for a fistful of dollars. “I say I’m in.”



“OK, Carlos. Here’s the scene.” Yawg Nimeh had his arm around his lead actor, and was pulling him away from the bright stage lights focused on the center of the *pueblo* bar. Once they were against the staging wall, he started in. “This is your first confrontation with Ada’s disguised bullfighter. She’ll be there on the right side of the bar, talking about the art of bullfighting to some friend”—Nimeh’s eyes darted around the room—“and then you’ll come in. You’ll have news from the front, and you’ll say some things about the *rojos*, and then you’ll tap her on the shoulder. That’s when the tension will really start to build.”

“OK,” said Carlos. He couldn’t believe they were using *La Guerra Civil* as a backdrop for the sequel.

“But before you two come to blows, there will be a bar that falls from the ceiling above you and separates the two of you. Like a line drawn in the sand, like the line that divides the two Spains.”

“Very dramatic,” said Carlos.

“I know,” Nimeh almost whispered. He grasped Carlos by the shoulders and gave him a wistful look, then turned and walked briskly to his director’s chair just off-set.

He really looks stupid in that beret, thought Carlos.

“OK, everybody, places please,” Yawg Nimeh’s voiced needled at him from the loudspeakers. Carlos walked slowly over to the bar entrance. It was still the first week of filming, and he was already sick of the project. He reached into his pocket and took out one of the many single-serving liquor bottles he had swiped from the hotel minibar, popped off the cap and downed it without even pausing to look at the label. Bourbon, he thought, surprised. He hadn’t remembered swiping any bourbon.

“OK, ready and...action.”

Carlos sighed and stepped forward into the light.